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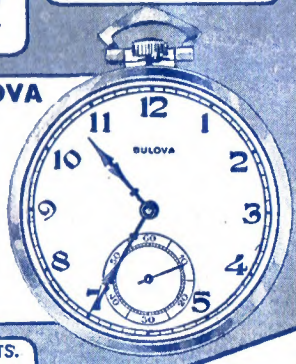

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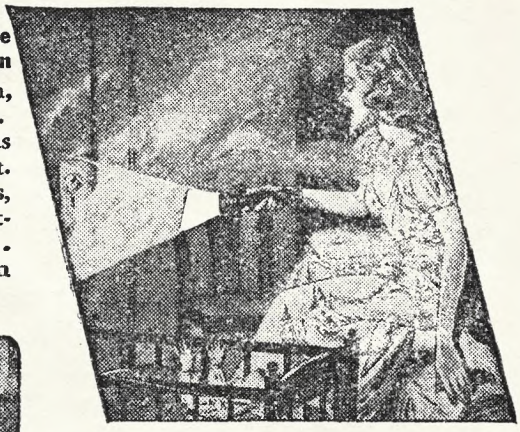

2. "My wife waked out of a sound sleep when the baby coughed," writes Mr. Sweetman, "and picked up our flashlight from a chair by the bed as she got up. In its bright beam smoke was curling under the bedroom door!

3. "Quickly, we wrapped the baby in blankets and climbed out the window just as the room burst into flame.

4. "Safe! But there we stood shivering in our night clothes watching everything else we owned burn up.

5. "Not quite everything, however. Firemen found the flashlight still burning where my wife had dropped it in that flaming bedroom... and because it, and those *fresh* DATED 'Eveready' batteries saved us from a living cremation, I shall treasure it all my life.

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POPULAR DETECTIVE

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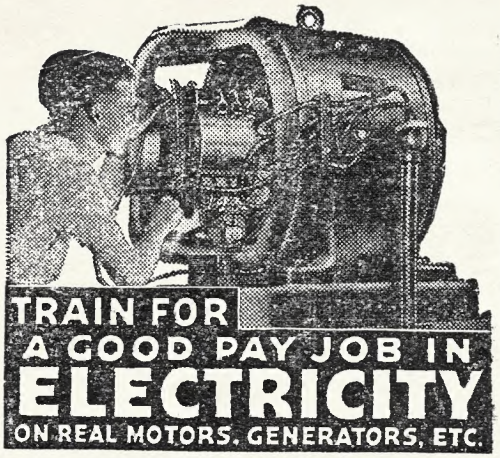

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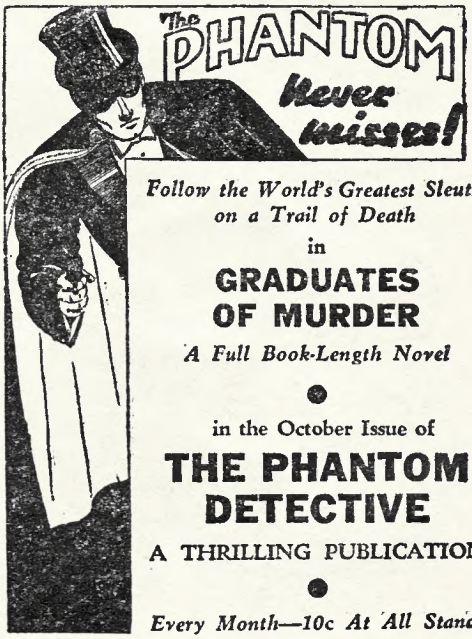

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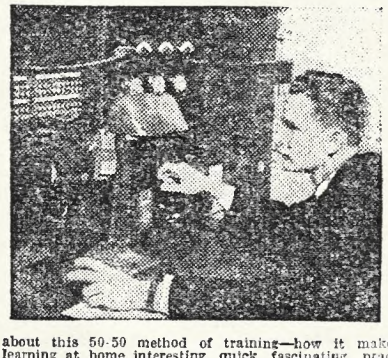

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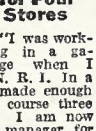

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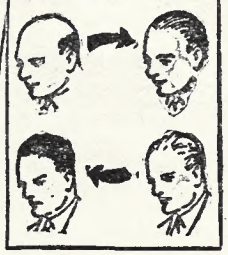

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EARNINGS

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Some of the Sovings You Con Show

You walk into an office and put down before your prospect a letter from a sales organization showing that they did work in their own office for $11 which formerly could have cost them over $200. A building supply corporation pays our man $70, whereas the bill could have been for $1,600! An automobile dealer pays our representative $15, whereas the expense could have been over $1,000. A department store has expense of $88.60, possible cost if done outside the business being well over $2,000. And so on. We could not possibly list all cases here. These are just a few of the many actual cases which we place in your hands to work with. Practically every line of business and every section of the country is represented by these field reports which hammer across dazzling, convincing money-saving opportunities which hardly any business man can fail to understand.

Profits Typicol of the Young, Growing Industry

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ALBION BESTOR'S unflickering eyes stared at the luminous yellow dial of his radio. It seemed like a cat's eye watching him from the dim corner of the room, fascinating him, drawing his nerves to the snapping point. Sparkling dance music came from the loudspeaker. It was music that Bestor hated, yet he did not seem to hear it. He was listening for something else. Then, too, he was incapable of hate at the moment. This night he knew but one emotion.

The music from the radio suddenly stopped mid-chord. Albion Bestor's white fingers clutched the arm of his chair.

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Another headliner in the next issue brings you the further exploits of Dinkey Davis, United States Narcotic Agent, whom some of you have met in previous issues. It's RING OF THE DEVIL, a thrill-a-minute novelet by Westmoreland Gray.

RING OF THE DEVIL is the stirring account of a spectacular crime coup spiked with thrills!

How Dinkey Davis tackles the most efficient smuggling-mob of them all will astonish you! You've read stories with a punch before—but this one's a knockout!

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Our special treat for next month's issue is another uproarious, hilarious episode in the sleuthing career of Willie Klump, Joe Archibald's comedy-clue character. POISON AND IVY will make you laugh between the first and second syllables of the first word in the story. Follow fiction's Sheer-luck Holmes as he writes another rollicking page in the annals of cockeyed criminology. When Willie Klump scents murder, death goes on a holiday and stays on a six-day binge!

In addition, there will be many other stories of the type that POPULAR DETECTIVE readers have learned to expect—the cream of the crop!

Readers—while waiting for the next gala issue, please write and tell me how you like *this* one. Your letters are swell and help us improve the magazine from issue to issue. Criticism, comment, suggestions, all are welcome—and a postcard's as good as a sealed letter. From time to time, in coming issues, we'll print some of the best letters received.

Thanks to you all! Be seeing you.

—THE EDITOR.

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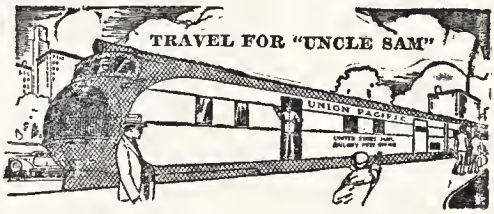

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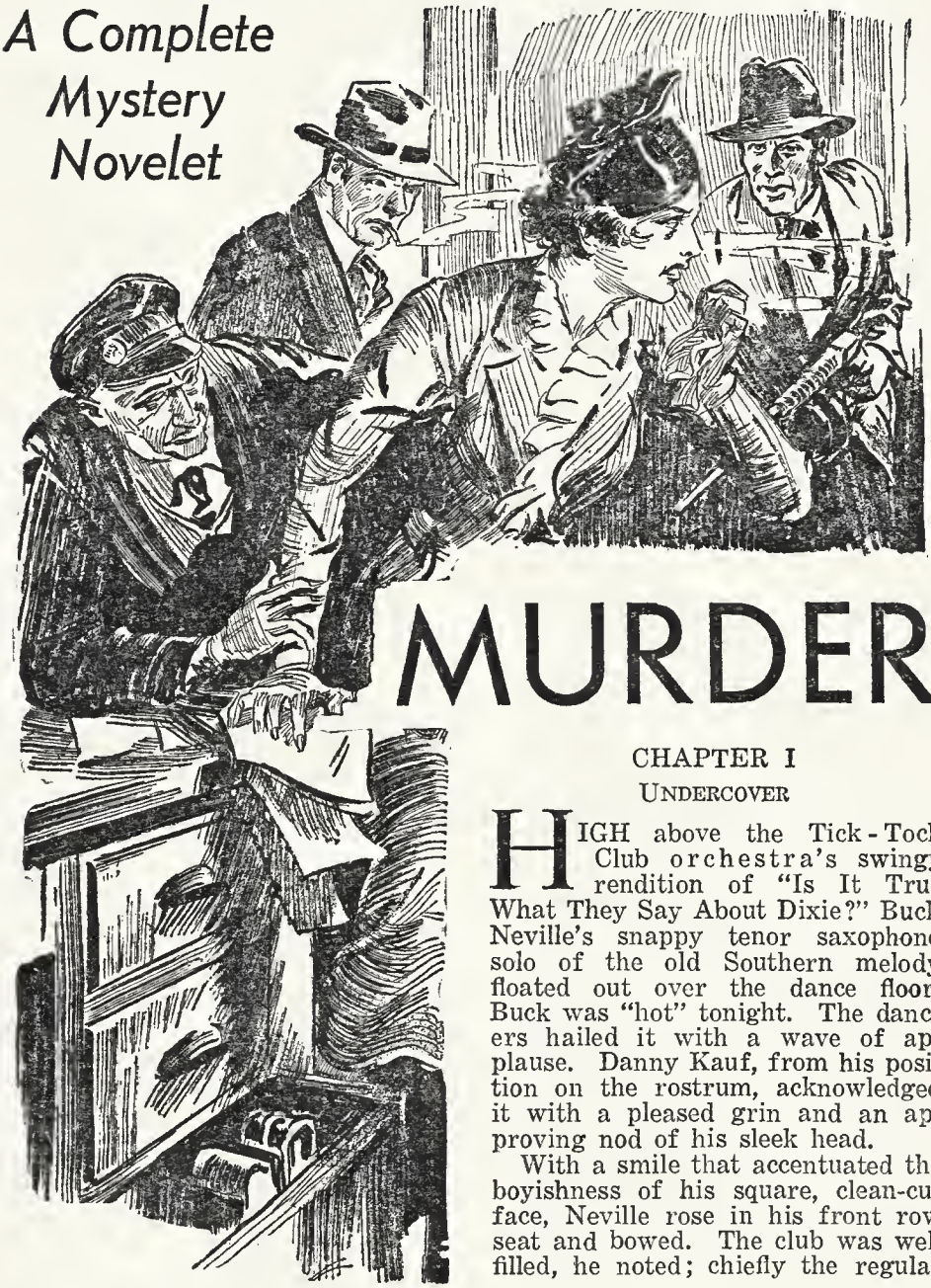

MURDER

CHAPTER I

UNDERCOVER

HIGH above the Tick-Tock Club orchestra's swingy rendition of "Is It True What They Say About Dixie?" Buck Neville's snappy tenor saxophone solo of the old Southern melody floated out over the dance floor. Buck was "hot" tonight. The dancers hailed it with a wave of applause. Danny Kauf, from his position on the rostrum, acknowledged it with a pleased grin and an approving nod of his sleek head.

With a smile that accentuated the boyishness of his square, clean-cut face, Neville rose in his front row seat and bowed. The club was well filled, he noted; chiefly the regular

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Buck Neville tried to forget that pain

MUSIC

patrons but a sprinkling of newcomers. Sightseers, one-nighters, most of these. His solo had gone over big with them; they were still clapping.

Again he bowed, and out of the corner of his eye caught a glimpse of Ugo Palmieri, the owner of the place, regarding him with contempt that he made no effort to conceal.

Neville flushed and his eyes narrowed as he sank back into his seat. Palmieri was right. Sitting and tooting a horn in a second-rate nightclub was a sad sort of occupation for a husky six-footer. A few years ago he had thought it a pretty fine job, but now—

His grayish-blue eyes turned back to his music, followed the little black notes over the staff until the number

to Achieve Vengeance and Redemption!

was completed. Then the orchestra leaned back for a breather, the instruments were laid aside, and those alert eyes returned to their canvass of the audience. Keen, watchful, he noted the faces, the expressions, the unconscious gestures.

For more than a month he had been doing that, sitting there and watching and waiting; trying to appear carefree and nonchalant when he knew that he was perched on a veritable volcano that accident might touch off at any moment! Patiently, waiting for the break—

At that moment it came.

Across the polished floor weaved a hard-faced individual in uncomfortable looking evening clothes. Swaying and staggering, he zigzagged his way toward the orchestra platform, right up to Neville's chair.

"I c'n do a better solo'n that," he announced confidently as he grabbed for the saxophone. "Lemme show yuh—won't bust the horn, y'needn't worry," he added as Neville discreetly moved the instrument back out of his reach. "I c'n play it. Hell, they always let me play the sax in Ugo's place down home—in Scranton; Scranton, Pa."

"Ugo's place in Scranton?" Neville's tone was doubting.

"What! Yuh didn't know that Ugo has a place in Scranton?" The would-be musician was amazed. "Sure! The Big Town Club. Swell place," he elaborated. "Got a hotel, too, Ugo has—the Cosm'politan. But they don't have an orchestra there, not at the Cosm'politan. Only at the Big Town. Swell orchestra there, an' they always let me play the sax. Lemme show yuh—"

Two of the Scrantonian's companions and one of Palmieri's bouncers converged on him at that moment and led him away, still proclaiming how much better he could handle that saxophone than Neville. And as the night progressed it began to look more and more as if he had been right; Buck Neville's performance became pretty sad.

Danny Kauf frowned at his poor timing, seethed when he was glaringly off-key, and blew up altogether when he stumbled up onto the platform and grabbed his music stand for support.

"You know Palmieri won't stand for any drinking while we're on the job, and you're drunk!" the disgusted orchestra leader snarled. "You're through, Neville. Pack your instrument and get out now, before you ruin another number for us!"

But Kauf would have been surprised, indeed, had he seen how quickly his discharged saxophonist sobered up once he was out of the Tick-Tock; how directly he made for a telephone booth and then hailed a taxicab to speed him to a downtown address.

CHAPTER II

G-Man's Prisoner

FEDERAL AGENT BUCK NEVILLE sat behind a threadbare curtain at the window of a shabby furnished room. On the table beside him was an ashtray piled to overflowing with cigarette butts. Abstractedly he started to grind out another, while his vigilant eyes remained glued to the entrance of the six-story Cosmopolitan Hotel, across the street—and then he stopped.

Tense, leaning forward close to the window, he watched a tall, dapperly dressed man come down the street and walk into the hotel. His gray-blue eyes sparkled with satisfaction now. He finished grinding out the stub, shoved back his chair and walked out the door, to lock it behind him for what he fervently hoped was the last time.

Five minutes later he walked through the hotel entrance he had been watching, set his battered suitcase on the floor in front of the desk and reached for the register.

"Something near the top, if you have it," he said to the clerk after he had glanced through several

pages of scrawled signatures. "Back will do; don't want to pay any more than I have to."

"Dollar-fifty room on the sixth floor rear," the clerk mumbled. "Cheapest we've got. Boy!"

The sixty-year-old "boy" was also the operator of the rickety elevator. Neville followed him down the hall to a bare, dingy room, flipped him a dime and waited until he had shuffled his way back to the car; listened until it had whined and clanked its way back to the main floor. Then Neville opened the door cautiously and surveyed the hall.

Empty and quiet. Didn't sound as if there was another soul on the floor. Closing the door noiselessly behind him he catfooted to the stairs that wound its way around the elevator shaft. All still quiet. Softly he padded his way to the floor below; along the corridor until he came to Room 506.

For a moment he bent to peer through the keyhole, to listen. Then a narrow-bladed pair of pincers came from an inside pocket. Expertly he slipped the long snout into the keyhole, fastened onto the key and gently turned it in the lock.

That made a bit of noise, a rusty squeak. But in the same moment he turned the knob, thrust the door open and stepped into the room, to confront the flashy individual he had watched enter the hotel. He closed the door and locked it behind him, and the blue-gray eyes were staring into the surprised face of Baldy John Roeding. Baldy John, who was many miles from his usual Broadway haunts.

For an instant Roeding seemed paralyzed with amazement; fear flared in his beady little eyes. Then he leaped to his feet. His mouth opened and a yell started to his lips, to be smashed back into his throat as Neville leaped, got a smothering grip on his throat.

Despite his dissipation and soft living, Baldy John Roeding was no weakling, and now he fought with the savagery of a cornered rat. Desperately he tried to smash his shining, billiard ball head into Neville's face, tried to knee him in the groin, tried to reach his eyes with gouging fingers. But long hours in the F.B.I. training school had taught Neville all those tricks; had taught him how to avoid them and how to punish them summarily.

Mercilessly he pinned Roeding to the floor and cut off his wind until his face was purple, until his struggles ceased and he gasped and begged for mercy.

"THAT'S better," Neville nodded. "Now you're being sensible."

"I haven't done anything," Baldy John whined the moment the pressure eased on his throat. "You ain't got a thing on me!"

"That's what Palmieri thought when he shipped you down here," Neville clipped. "But fleeing across a state line in order to avoid being subpoenaed as a witness in a murder case happens to be a crime that comes under the jurisdiction of the Federal Bureau of Investigation. You're under arrest as witness to the murder of Martin Kirby in the Tick-Tock Club in New York, and you're starting back there with me now. Come on."

His hand was gripping Roeding's collar, hauling him to his feet, dragging him toward the door. By now the bald-headed Broadwayite was ashen with fear. Frantically he tried to hold back, to pull away from that door.

"It'll mean my death if you try to take me out of this hotel!" he babbled, terrified. "I've been watched every minute since I came down here! They saw you come in; I know they did! They watch everybody! The minute we try to leave they'll cut us down without a chance!"

Neville knew that Roeding was almost prostrate with terror. Beads of perspiration were oozing out of the man's forehead, dotting the backs of his wringing hands. This was no pretending; Roeding believed with awful certainty that death waited outside that door for him.

For a moment the G-Man studied his prisoner.

"You were in the side room of the Tick-Tock Club when Kirby was killed?" he offered tentatively.

"Yes—yes, I was there!" Roeding grabbed eagerly at the chance for delay.

"You saw him sitting at a table with Lupe Montez, the Tick-Tock dancer?"

"Yes—yes, I saw them! I was there before Kirby came. Lupe was there, too; she was waiting for him. He went right to her table when he came in. They were talking and—" He hesitated, torn between the desire to appease this relentless Federal man at any cost and terror at the revelation he was making.

"And then Heavy Zimmer came in," Neville prompted. "Go on, Roeding; you saw the gun in his hand and then—"

ROEDING glanced fearfully around the little room.

"Yeah, I saw the gun in Heavy's hand," he admitted hoarsely. "He just walked up to Kirby and let him have it without a word. There were others there, too. Palmieri and three others. One of them was Chalky Waller, and you know what happened to Chalky last week. They almost cut him in half. That's what will happen to me if you try to take me out of here. I know too much. I'm on the spot, I tell you!"

"Take it easy," Neville tried to calm him. "Nobody's going to cut you down while you're in my hands. You're a Federal prisoner, and you are going back to New York with a whole skin. I'll guarantee to get you out of this hotel and out of town safely. But first you're going to sit down at that desk and write out a complete statement of what you saw, so that you don't have a convenient lapse of memory when we get back to the city."

Babbling a confession in order to kill time was one thing, but putting it down in black and white was another. Baldy John cowered back in his chair and wailed protests. He couldn't write anything like that! It would be his death warrant! He'd tell all they wanted to know at Headquarters, but he couldn't write it—

Neville's fingers fastened in his collar and yanked, and Roeding was halfway to the door before he broke loose and flung himself down at the desk.

"All right, I'll write it," he said. "But you gotta protect me! You gave me your word you'd get me out of here—"

He was still sniveling and whining when Neville took the finished statement, read it with a nod of satisfaction, folded it and thrust it into an inside pocket.

Then he led the way out into the hall, upstairs to the room he had left a short time before. Tremblingly, the abject Roeding climbed out onto the fire-escape, upstairs to the roof, across to the corner building next door. That building had an entrance on the side street as well as the avenue. Without interference Buck led the way through the roof scuttle, down six flights of stairs and out the side entrance, where his coupé stood waiting at the curb.

Like a rat seeking its hole, Baldy John scooted across the sidewalk and into the car. Then Neville was beside him in the driver's seat, the motor snorted, and they were off.

But almost immediately the Federal man's trained eyes noticed that another car was following them, keeping pace with them. At the same time he realized that his machine was acting queerly. But there was no chance to inspect it then; not with that pursuing car dogging their heels.

They were on the outskirts of Scranton. A few more blocks and he would give the car the gas, then he'd show them some speed. But the other car was creeping up. He pressed down on the throttle, and still the sedan behind him cut down the intervening distance.

Then a shot lanced out at them, another.

Time now to step on it. Down to

the floorboards he jammed the throttle. Lead was hailing after them, slapping against the back of the car. Roeding was whining and cringing down into the seat. Open country now; tree-bordered fields flashing past. The speedometer passed sixty-five, climbed up to eighty—and suddenly the car lurched sickeningly.

Rending of metal, squealing of brakes, crashing of glass! Grimly Neville held onto the wheel as the car lurched wildly, half stood on its nose, then turned over and over. In that nightmare of uncontrollable action he caught a glimpse of the right front wheel rolling off into a ditch. And in that split second he knew what had happened.

His own car had been the trap they had baited for him! His own car, with some of the bolts on the front wheel removed and the others loosened so that they worked themselves off as soon as he stepped on the gas.

With a metallic groaning and screaming the wrecked car came to a stop, wedged upside-down against a tree. Again a leaden hail of bullets beat against it. Somehow, Neville managed to throw himself through the window, managed to wriggle his way to the cover of a bush and from there down the hillside into a clump of trees.

It was too late to do anything for Roeding. He was caught against the side of the car, and that first murderous burst of tommy-gun fire had laced into his squirming body.

Then the killers discovered that one of their victims had escaped. Neville could hear them cursing, could hear them starting to beat the bushes on the hillside for him. One of his legs felt as if it was broken. He could barely crawl, but he managed to drag himself to a dense patch of evergreens, wriggled under them on his belly and lay still while he held his automatic ready.

"We shouldn't have let the lousy dick get out o' that hotel room with Baldy's confession," one of them snarled as he passed within scant yards of Neville's hiding place. "There's gonna be hell to pay when Ugo hears about this."

For more than an hour they clung doggedly to the search, but at last they gave up. Neville heard their car start up, heard it roll off toward Scranton. Warily he edged his way out of his covert, crept farther down the hill, across a little vale and out onto the road at a point a quarter mile from his wrecked car.

WITH the aid of a hitch he got back to the city, hailed a cab and was driven to the hotel that had been his headquarters since his arrival in Scranton. Gloomily he flung himself into a chair and took stock of a perfect fiasco.

He had escaped alive, with Roeding's statement; but that was of doubtful value, now that Baldy John was dead. Any good lawyer would be able to tear it to pieces if he did not succeed in having it barred from evidence altogether. He had failed dismally, and the word he had given Roeding so confidently—the word of a Federal Agent—had been flouted and rendered worthless. Roeding had trusted him, had staked his life on the reputation of the G-men, and now he was a mangled corpse, sieved with gangster bullets!

A complete failure, Neville castigated himself bitterly. And the patient work of six weeks gone for naught because he had been so sure of himself that he had let Palmieri's hoods out-think him.

Two months before, Martin Kirby, an eminent lawyer who had distinguished himself as attorney for the associated oil companies in their efforts to curb the illegal activities of fly-by-night pirate outfits, had been chosen by the Governor as special prosecutor to investigate the vice racket in New York City. The appointment had not been announced, but in some mysterious way it had leaked out. The night

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before the Governor was to give it to the newspapers Kirby went to the Tick-Tock Club and was shot to death.

By the time the police arrived the small anteroom in which the killing had been staged was deserted except for the corpse. All witnesses of the crime had disappeared. But from a man who had left the room just prior to the shooting, the police learned that at least six persons had been present when the fatal shots were fired.

But every one of them had disappeared from the city.

The murder gun had been identified as belonging to Heavy Zimmer, Ugo Palmieri's bodyguard, but he flatly denied having used it—and the case against him was stalled for lack of witnesses.

AT THAT point the Governor had appealed to the Federal Bureau of Investigation to try and locate the missing witnesses.

Buck Neville, with other members of the service, was at that time at work on a series of dock and warehouse robberies that had baffled the police. Valuable cargoes were disappearing from New York piers and later turning up in various parts of the country, although every road out of the city had been watched in vain. Buck was at work as a stevedore, but his chief had called him back to the district headquarters.

"You're a musician; still have your union card," the chief commented as he consulted Neville's index card. "Here's something you should be able to handle. The Governor wants to know what became of the witnesses who saw Martin Kirby murdered."

Martin Kirby! Buck Neville's pulses pounded and his eyes narrowed. He had known Martin Kirby well. It was Kirby who had taken an interest in him and chided him out of his career as a saxophonist. Kirby who had encouraged him to prepare himself for the Government's crack law-enforcing service and had helped him to make the stiff grade until he could qualify as a G-man. Kirby had been his sponsor in the service—and now he was dead; cut down by gangster bullets on the eve of activity that would have smoked New York's slimiest racketeers out of their dirty holes.

"We can work you into the Tick-Tock Club as a saxophone replacement when the regular player is induced to take a layoff," the chief was saying. "After that it will be up to you to keep your eyes and ears wide open. Palmieri has spirited those witnesses away somewhere, and it's up to us to find them and drag them back."

For nearly six weeks Neville had sat there in the Tick-Tock waiting for that lead. And then, when he had found it, when he had located one of the witnesses, he had bungled the job. By one bit of carelessness he had wasted all his efforts and destroyed his own further usefulness on the case. He had let the job of avenging Martin Kirby slip through his fingers.

He had let Palmieri's hoods outsmart the G-men; had put them in a position where they could laugh at the service that must not fail—the service that had built up its splendid reputation because failure was not a part of its code or its program.

Bitterly Neville lashed himself as he emptied the dresser drawers and started to pack his bag for the trip back to New York. Back to report that he had fallen down on the job ignominiously!

"We interrupt our program to bring you a late news bulletin," the radio blaring in the room next to his interrupted his gloomy thoughts. "The body of Baldy John Roeding, well known on Broadway, was discovered in a wrecked automobile near Scranton, Pennsylvania, this evening. He had been killed by machine-gun fire. The police are investigating—"

Only two or three minutes had passed after that announcement, when the telephone in his room

rang. Neville picked up the receiver —and immediately became alert.

"This is Lupe Montez," a woman's voice came uncertainly over the wire. "You know me, Mr. Neville —the dancer from the Tick-Tock Club. I am here in Scranton, at the Big Town Club. I just heard what happened to Baldy John. Oh, I must see you, Mr. Neville!" her voice rose in shrill terror. "I must have protection or I'll be the next! They'll stop my mouth the way they did for Baldy—"

Lupe Montez! Neville's pulses leaped. Lupe Montez, the bait that had lured Martin Kirby to the Tick-Tock. He went there to see her, and walked into the death trap that was waiting for him.

Neville's eyes narrowed. There was still a chance to redeem his blunder, to pull the thing out of the fire!

If he could only nab Lupe Montez and take her back to New York, the case against Heavy Zimmer would be in the bag!

CHAPTER III

Death Trap

"PLEASE, Mr. Neville," the quavering voice was begging over the telephone, "you've got to meet me! I'm practically a prisoner here; they watch me constantly and don't let me leave the building. So I can't go to you. But if you will come here to the club tonight there will be a chance for me to talk to you between my numbers—"

Neville's lips curled as he listened to her pleading voice. This was the woman who had led Martin Kirby to his death; the moll who had put the finger on him and stood by while he was shot down. And now she was brazenly trying the same trick again!

She was leading him into a trap, he knew. But it was his only chance to redeem himself; the only chance to avenge Martin Kirby.

Besides, he was curious about this woman who had been able to vamp Kirby. The attorney had not been a woman's man—his work was too important to him for that—and Neville could not understand what attraction he could have found in this hardboiled night club singer.

"All right," he cut short her entreaties. "I'll come down to see you. Right away. Half an hour at the latest."

Carefully he examined his automatic and the smaller gun that slipped into his shoulder holster. Then he started out, his alert eyes were on guard from the moment he stepped out of his room.

Neville watched the fellow as he followed him out of the hotel. Easily he spotted the car that started up on the other side of the street as he got into a taxi and gave the driver the Big Town Club address. They were watching him every moment; taking no chances on letting him slip away.

Neville frowned. In his inside pocket he had the Roeding statement, now sealed in an envelope and addressed to a realty company in New York that was the address of the district office of the F.B.I. But he did not dare to try to post it with that car following and watching his every move.

He could fairly feel the watching eyes boring into his back; could fairly feel the tommy-gun muzzles trained on him. And there, on the next block, was the Big Town Club.

Neville could see the burly bruiser of a doorman waiting for him in front of the club, stepping out ready to open the cab door. Quickly he slid back the window behind the driver.

"I'm leaving an envelope back here in the side of the seat cushion," he said hurriedly. "Get it into a mailbox as quickly as you can, and the rest of this bill is yours."

The driver eyed the five-spot and his eyebrows raised.

"Okay, buddy," he winked knowingly.

That was taking a chance, but it was a hundred times safer than taking the thing into the club, Neville knew.

The place was almost empty at that early hour of the evening, but there were reserved signs on nearly every table. The head waiter led him to one that was in an alcove to one side of the dance floor—an alcove with a door at the rear.

"Perfect," Neville told himself grimly. "Everything's taken care of. They haven't missed a bet—"

THEN the girl came to his table, and Buck Neville got the surprise of his life!

This was no hardboiled gang moll, no tough night club songbird. As she slipped into the chair opposite him his keen eyes quickly detected that the bold Spanish make-up was superficial. Beneath was a soft, sweet face — a face he had seen somewhere before. Eyes that did queer things to him and reminded him immediately of where he had seen them before!

This was Louise Monroe, the girl he had met one night at Martin Kirby's home! The girl who had impressed him so profoundly that he had never quite been able to forget her.

Louise Monroe! And again her dark eyes were working their witchery on him, stirring his pulses just as they had that other time he had sat talking to her under such different circumstances. Stirring him—he caught himself up short, and his eyes were narrowed and hard as he reminded himself what this girl had done.

"So you're Lupe Montez," he said brittlely.

"My professional name," she explained, but Neville did not seem to hear.

"—the Lupe Montez who put the finger on Martin Kirby; the Delilah who lured him up to the gun muzzle!" he flung at her.

The girl cowered away from his biting words as if she had been struck with a whip. The red blood rushed up into her cheeks, and her breath came pantingly from half-opened lips.

"You don't understand! It wasn't what you think!" she stammered. "It wasn't that, I tell you—oh, if only you could understand—"

"I wondered what sort of a woman could have dragged Martin Kirby to his death," he finished bitterly. "Now I know. But what I don't know is—what do you want from me?"

"That statement Baldy John gave you." Now she seemed to have regained control of herself. She returned stare for stare and leaned across the table, her hand half-extended for the paper. "Please give it to me."

"What statement?" Neville countered.

"Oh, they know you have it; there is no use pretending." Now her voice was hard, edged with a sneer. "There was a dictograph planted in Baldy John's room. Every word you said was overheard."

A dictograph! Then Palmieri's killers had been listening to Roeding's babbling admissions. Poor devil, he had signed his own death warrant even more effectively than he had feared when he signed his name to that statement.

"You saw what happened to Roeding. The same dose is waiting for you unless you show some common sense," her voice was droning into Neville's ears. "I called you down here to give you a chance. Take it or leave it, feller. It's nothing in my life one way or the other."

She was trying to be callous, tough, but she wasn't putting it over. He caught the false note, knew that she was pretending. And as he stared straight into her eyes he saw that she was frightened. Beneath her hardboiled pretense there was terror close to the surface.

"Then we're wasting time," he snapped, and started to get up from the table. But now the pretense was swept away, forgotten, as she grasped his arm and frantically pulled him back into his chair.

"Please give it to me," she begged. "*Please!* I am your only chance. If you don't give it to me I shall have no alternative—I'll have to give the word that will mean your death! Please don't make me do that! Oh—"

Neville's vigilant eyes had not been missing a thing that was going on around him. He had seen several hard-looking customers take up positions near the alcove. At any moment now the trap would be sprung! Until they were ready she was stalling for time, keeping him there.

His danger-sharpened ears caught a low voice, a fragment of conversation, in the corridor beyond that door at the rear of the alcove.

"We ripped the room inside out and it ain't there," someone was reporting. "And he didn't have a chance to get rid of it; we were watching him every minute. He's got it on him, Tony—he must have!"

The girl had heard those words, too. The pleading words died on her lips. Her face blanched, and her eyes opened wide, became great pools of stark horror.

Ever so slowly Neville turned his head, to glance in the direction of that terrified stare. There in the alcove doorway stood Tony Sirelli, Ugo Palmieri's scarfaced second in command. Beside him was a sleek-haired individual with a cat-like smile.

The orchestra launched into a loud, blaring foxtrot. Sleek-hair walked up to the table and his smile had become a mocking grin as he half-bowed to the girl.

"You are having this dance with me?" The tone of his voice, the look in his eyes, made the question a command.

Stiffly, like an automaton, Louise Monroe got up from her chair and accepted his arm. Neville could see her eyes contract, could see her tense, her taut nerves ready for what was to come, as she stepped away from the table. And then he went into action!

With an up-thrust of his knee he tilted the table, caught it under one edge and whirled it up as a shield. Bullets splintered through the wood, but in the same split second he sent it crashing full into the face of the spidery little gunman on his right. In the same whirlwind motion he was across the alcove, charging head-on into a thick-set, slow-thinking hood who was still trying to get his gun out of its holster.

Out of the corner of his eye the G-man glimpsed a black muzzle that was coming down, centering. Instinctively he ducked—and a clap of thunder went off beside his ear. Hot powder sparks burned his cheek as he grabbed for the fellow's weapon, caught it and twisted it free as he almost snapped the thug's arm with a grip that he owed to a certain husky instructor back in the Washington training school.

But before he had a chance to swing the weapon and bring it down on the thug's head something crashed down on his skull. Blinding pain shot through him, numbed him. Frantically he fought to stay on his feet, but his knees were buckling under him. Something that felt like a pile-driver smashed him in the face, and his head thudded back against the floor.

Dazed, he lay there, unable to lift a finger, barely conscious of someone kneeling over him, of hands searching his clothes with frantic eagerness.

"Oh, please let me find it!" the girl's voice sobbed. "I know he has it on him. Just let me—"

HER voice ended in a gasp as she was brushed aside. Then rough hands grabbed him, pawed at his pockets, yanked his clothing off him and ripped them to shreds as they probed into the lining.

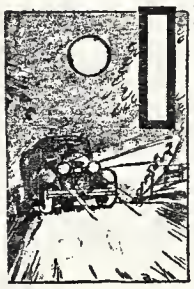
"Well, he ain't got it on him—unless he ate it," a disgusted voice growled. "Damned if I know what he did with it, Tony."

Now Tony Sirelli was standing above him, looking down at him, and a soft whistle of surprise came from his thick lips.

"So it's Neville, the sweet little saxophone played — a G-man!" he muttered. "Won't Ugo be interested to find this out. It's a mighty good thing you fellers didn't cool him off!"

CHAPTER IV

Sealed Lips



IN WAVES the blackness of semi-consciousness rolled over Buck Neville as he lay there on the floor. Vaguely he was aware that he was being tied up; that they were tossing him around brutally as the ropes were looped around him and drawn tight. Dimly he could feel himself being carried; being pushed through the door of a car, propped up on a seat.

Gradually the cool night air began to clear his head. He was in the back seat of a large sedan, between two thugs who watched him like hawks. On the folding seats in the middle of the car sat Louise Monroe and Tony Sirelli. And there was another thug on the front seat beside the chauffeur.

They were on their way to New York, he saw by a road sign that flashed past.

But already his reviving brain was beginning to hope, beginning to plan. It was still early in the evening. That meant that they would reach the metropolis shortly after midnight. Once there, he would have to make his opportunity; would have to figure some way to get the upper hand, some way to attract attention.

Now they were speeding across New Jersey. Soon they would have to take a ferry or drive through the Holland Tunnel.

But before that happened Sirelli gave curt orders.

"Gag him, tight so there's no chance for him to chew it loose. Tie up his eyes. Now dump him in the bottom of the car and put your feet over him. If he makes a move clout him over the head with your gats—and don't be afraid of his feelings."

With his face against the floor carpet and four feet jabbed into his back Buck Neville concentrated on listening. His ears were all that might help him, now. One by one he picked out the city noises—they were through the Holland Tunnel, then they were speeding uptown.

After a while they stopped. Buck Neville could hear a heavy door swing open. The car turned, ran up a ramp, then down an incline on the other side. The heavy door rumbled shut behind it. They must have run into the garage next door to the Tick-Tock Club. If only there were some way of tipping off that information, some way of getting it to the district office where an alert operator waited day and night for just such calls.

Roughly he was yanked out of the car. A thug on each side of him, he was pushed along up and down stairs, through corridors, then into a brightly lit room. An office, he saw when the blindfold was yanked off his eyes and the torturing gag was taken out of his mouth.

Then a door opened—a heavy door that fit as if the room were hermetically sealed — and Ugo Palmieri strode in. Now Neville knew where he was. This was Palmieri's private office in the basement of the club building. As tight and soundproof as a bank vault!

From the doorway Palmieri surveyed the room with dark eyes that snapped with anger. Eyes that centered their wrath on Sirelli.

"Why the hell did you bring them here?" he snarled at his lieutenant. "You know I don't let any double-crossing rats through that door! Well," he whirled on Neville, "it's a one-way trip you're making, G-man."

Suddenly recognition flashed in the blazing eyes, and hot rage flushed his fat cheeks.

"Neville!" he ground out between savagely clenched teeth. "Our so very clever saxophone player! So they planted you right in my or-

chestra, did they?" Without warning his fist lashed out and smashed Buck in the face. "That's just part payment for your cleverness. Nobody, not even smart little G-men, puts anything over on Ugo Palmieri and gets away with it. That's just a taste of what's coming to you. *What did you do with that statement Baldy John gave you?"*

Palmieri's puffy face was pushed close against Neville's. The blazing black eyes were glaring into his, trying to batter down his will by their fury. But Buck Neville did not flinch away from the hot, whiskey-laden breath that jetted into his face.

"Don't know what you're talking about, Palmieri," he said calmly. "You're wasting your time."

Viciously the heavy fist smashed into his face, started the blood from one corner of his mouth. Palmieri laughed evilly and turned to one of his thugs.

"Tie him to that chair, Carlos," he ordered, "and then go to work. *I want him to talk!"*

Then there was an interruption—a tapping at the door.

WITH a snarl Palmieri grabbed the knob and yanked it open, to glare out at one of his waiters.

"Two cops downstairs," the fellow reported. "Captain O'Connor and Sergeant Walsh. They wanna see you right away."

Palmieri frowned, glanced around his office uncertainly. Then he made up his mind.

"Get the dick out of that chair," he snapped to Carlos. "Gag him tight, and put him in that closet." Then he whirled on the girl. "You get in there with him and see that he doesn't make a sound, understand? Not a peep or it'll be too bad!"

With a thud Neville landed on the closet floor, and the girl stepped in beside him. Then the door closed and they were in utter darkness. Fiercely he went to work on the ropes that bound his wrists.

If he could just get loose before the police left. Whatever their reason for being here Palmieri was probably lying out of it, as usual, parrying the officers' questions, pretending complete ignorance. Soon they would leave in disgust. If he could only break loose and tear that gag out of his mouth so that he could shout to them!

The ropes were coming apart! But the girl must have felt his movements, must have sensed what was happening. Frantically she threw herself upon him and held him helpless; pinned down his legs when he tried to kick against the door.

[*Turn Page*]

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"Don't!" she gasped into his ear. "Oh, please don't! I *can't* let you do that—"

Silently they rolled and threshed on the floor. But now Neville's hands were free. Pressing them against the floor, he managed to get to his knees. He was almost to his feet when she hurled him back against the wall. Wildly he stabbed his hands behind him, clawing for support—and suddenly the solid wall behind him gave way, swung noiselessly outward!

Down a flight of steps they rolled and tumbled, to land with a thud on a cold floor some distance below. The jar of that fall completely knocked the wind out of the girl, and her hands loosened their tense grip.

Instantly Neville ripped the gag from between his jaws and was tugging at the ropes that bound his ankles. Free at last, he groped his way around the black hole in which he found himself. It was a cool, damp passageway that extended from the flight of stairs to where he could hear the sound of muted voices in the distance. Carefully he groped his way down its length until he came up against a door—a door that was locked from the tunnel side.

Slowly, carefully, he turned the key in the lock, while his ears strained to catch the sounds of pursuit from Palmieri's office that he expected at any second. Cautiously he drew the door back a few inches—and stared down into a big subterranean room in which there were two huge gasoline trucks and half a dozen smaller trucks. Seven or eight men were at work loading the gasoline trucks from the others—but it was not gas that was going into them!

Neville stared in astonishment as rolls of silk, bales of furs, cases of expensive liquor, and other stolen merchandise were stowed into the capacious tanks of the fake gasoline trucks. Thousands of dollars worth of disappearing merchandise that the baffled police and the Federal men were searching for!

And then a wild fury landed upon his back!

Frantically the girl struggled with him, trying to drag him down, to pin him back against the wall of the passageway, while despairing sobs welled up from her throat. Neville managed to get an arm around her, to pin her arms at her sides.

"Please—I can't breathe!" she begged. "Please, I won't make any more trouble—"

"Your word that you won't interfere again?" Neville demanded; and when she gasped a promise: "That's better. Wait right here until I get back."

Before she could answer he was cat-footing back along the passageway, groping his way up the stairs to the hidden door into the closet—when suddenly it swung wide open, almost in his face. For an instant the oblong of light blinded him. Then he was flattened against the cold wall as the passageway rocked with thunder and a hail of tommy-gun lead poured through the opening.

In the flame of that death-spitting muzzle Neville saw the scarred face of Tony Sirelli snarling evilly, saw the gun muzzle swing toward him. And in that moment he gasped and tottered, to fall headlong down the stairs.

SIRELLI cursed with savage satisfaction. His finger touched a button at the side of the doorway and electric bulbs in the ceiling of the passageway sprang into life, lighting it dimly. Then he was leaping down the steps, two at a time, toward the still heap sprawled at their base.

But the moment he reached his victim Buck Neville came to life. Like an uncoiling spring he leaped at the killer, grabbing for his throat, battering him back against the wall of the passageway, knocking the tommy gun out of range. Sirelli was taken completely by surprise. Before he could bring the gun to bear again it was dropping from his nerveless hands as the G-man's fist

zoomed up under his jaw and smashed his head back against the wall.

Before Sirelli's body had crumpled to the floor Neville had recovered the tommy gun. Then his fingers were running over the killer's body, plucking an automatic from a shoulder holster.

Now there were other faces at the top of the stairs. Palmieri's hoods were surging through the doors, guns spitting lead down the stairwell. Quickly Neville triggered the tommy gun, and two of the electric bulbs blinked out as the killers threw themselves flat on the steps.

"That's just a warning, Palmieri," he shouted up to the night club owner. "I've got the typewriter, and I'll cut anyone in half who's fool enough to come down those stairs!"

Softly he padded his way back along the passageway, back to where the girl still crouched waiting for him. With the automatic butt he batted out two lights at this end of the tunnel so that the only spot of illumination was in the center, through which the thugs would have to pass to reach them.

"Take this," he ordered as he thrust the automatic into her hand. "Hold it ready to shoot the first man that comes into this passageway. I'm depending on you to protect my back."

With the tommy gun held ready he covered the remaining few feet to the door at the farther end, started to open it warily—then froze with his hand on the knob as a girl's agonized scream echoed shrilly through the passageway!

That wasn't Louise Monroe's scream!

From the head of the stairs Palmieri's voice snarled something unintelligible and again the girl screamed piteously!

Neville's straining ears heard Louise gasp—a gasp that was half a sob of despair.

"Irene!" she called tremblingly. Then the uncertainty went out of her voice. It became cold and determined as she swung on Neville. "She's my sister. I can't let her down now," she said doggedly. "Drop that tommy gun or I'll empty this automatic into you!"

With a yank of his hand Neville yanked the door wide open—and the automatic went off at his back! Instinctively he grabbed at the doorway and braced himself against it as a slug plowed into his left shoulder and almost pitched him down into the room below!

CHAPTER V

Caverns of Death

THAT shot centered every eye in the subterranean room on Neville, and instantly lead started lancing at him from the trucks. But he was at something of an advantage because of his elevated position. Crouching low in the doorway, he fingered the trigger of the tommy gun and sprayed the place with lead that rattled deafeningly on the metal sides of the gasoline trucks.

Then, before they could steady their aim, he had darted to one side and was zigzagging his way down the short flight of steps. Bullets whined past him, tugged at his clothes, cut across his skin. But he raced on. Three of the crooks lay sprawled beside the gasoline trucks when he reached the floor level. Another threw up his hands and toppled from the back of one of the unloading trucks.

In the middle of the floor it was just a matter of minutes before he would be caught in a crossfire and cut down, he knew. The big trucks were his only chance. Crouching low, tommy gun clearing the way for him, he rounded one of the huge gasoline tankers and dived between its wheels—to scythe down one of the two hoods who were creeping up for a side shot. The other threw down his gun and howled for mercy.

"Over here in front of me with your hands in the air!" Neville clipped. "Snappy—or you get what he got!"

Cringing and whining, the yegg crawled forward as he was told, while he begged his companions to hold their fire.

By now Neville had recognized the cavern-like place for what it really was—an old liquor drop; one of those underground storerooms used during prohibition to swallow up trucks loaded full of liquor and hide them effectively against the most thorough search. Somewhere, he knew, there must be a way out of this doorless place for the trucks.

"All right," he ordered the thug, while the muzzle of the tommy gun pressed against the fellow's flinching back, "we're going out of here. Start the works."

Obediently the captive crawled to one end of the truck, to what looked like a metal desk attached to the floor. His hand jerked down on a lever and the section of the floor on which the gasoline trucks were standing started to rise.

FLAT on his belly beneath one of the gas trucks, Neville turned the muzzle of the gun to search again among the half-unloaded trucks.

Then the rising floor was so high that they were out of range. Slowly it ground up to another level, came to a stop—a large garage—a garage that was ominously quiet.

With the tommy gun poking out ahead of him, Neville crawled from beneath the truck, and fell back onto one knee as a bullet ripped along his side like a branding iron.

Two steps and he was up into the cab, but he took along a bullet in the calf of his leg. Bullets were rattling against the body of the truck, whining into the cab, pounding the windshield to pieces.

Blood was dripping down from his shoulder and matting his shirt; was running down his leg and filling his shoe. It was trickling down his forehead, flowing out of his cheeks from lead spatter wounds that he had not even noticed in the frenzy of that mad battle.

But that gasoline truck cab had been built with just such a defense in mind. Its sides were bullet-proof, and as long as he could keep from exposing himself he could hold his own. Screams of agony and savage curses told him that all of his fire was not being wasted. Some of the guns were being silenced, too.

If he could only manage to hold out a little while longer the terrific din of those blazing guns must surely be heard outside and recognized as no possible automobile backfiring. Once a crowd began to collect the police would be on hand.

But that hope died still-born as a door at the side of the garage opened. In glided an armored car, to come to a stop directly in front of the big street doors. Flame and lead poured out of the steel-protected gun-ports; beat a hellish tattoo against the front of the gas truck's cab. No metal could stand up against such a pounding. The plates were buckling, crumbling. The glass was smashed into pieces, battered out of its wrecked frame.

And the last bullet from Neville's tommy gun flattened itself harmlessly against one of the blazing gun-ports. The drum was empty. He was weaponless, defenseless.

Not quite! In that moment of almost certain death his desperate brain snatched at a tissue-thin ray of hope—at a mad chance!

Crouching beneath the battered windshield, he fumbled with the wrecked dashboard while his heart leaped into his mouth. That leaden battering had not yet smashed a vital part of the motor; it throbbed into life!

The blasting from the armored car's turrets became heavier, concentrated fiercely on the sieved cab. It seemed suicide to dare that fire! But there was no other chance. Buck Neville's calves tensed under him, while an agony of pain seared through his whole body, made his head swim dizzily. With a leap that took all of his strength he flung him-

self into the driver's seat and grasped the wheel, slammed the truck into gear as his foot jammed the throttle down to the floorboards.

Straight ahead the heavy truck tore, with gears shifting and the motor roaring more deafeningly than the frantically blazing guns. Straight ahead, with all the speed he could coax out of it—to crash head-on into the side of the armored car!

The terrific force of that collision lifted the gangster-manned fortress off its wheels and hurled it forward, flat against the big doors of the garage and still onward! The doors buckled under that impetus, buckled and tore away from their frames, to crash out onto the sidewalk. Out over them spilled the battered armored car, on its side, at the mercy of the crazy juggernaut that came plowing after it!

That much Buck Neville saw before he lost his hold on the wheel and toppled out of the driver's seat. Vaguely, above the crash and groan of rending metal, he heard the wail of police sirens. Then the agony of the wounds that seemed to cover his entire body faded with the light that was dimming before his eyes; that was fading into a soothing, all-enveloping blackness.

The infernal bedlam that had almost deafened him was stilled when Buck Neville opened his eyes. All was quiet now. Quiet faces looking down at him from the lines of curious onlookers the police were holding back. Quiet words from a white-uniformed man who bent over him. Quiet sobs from the girl who knelt at his side.

QUIET, and the odor of drugs, instead of that hellish drumfire and the acrid smell of burned gunpowder.

Slowly it all began to come back to him, began to make sense. He saw that he was lying on a padded stretcher on the sidewalk while an ambulance surgeon administered first-aid. His face and scalp were stiff with plaster, and bandages seemed to swathe him in a dozen places. And that girl—she was Louise Monroe—was tearing off more bandages as tears ran down her cheeks!

"He's coming around all right, just as I told you he would," the interne grinned. "He'll be ready to move as soon as we plug up a couple more of these holes."

Funny thing about that girl; she seemed to sob more, now that his eyes were open and he was looking up at her.

"I didn't fire that shot into your back," she whispered as she bent over him. "Please believe I didn't do that! I tried to—I admit that—but I just couldn't pull the trigger. Ugo Palmieri snatched the gun out of my hand and shot you. Then I grabbed his arm and held it when he tried to pull the trigger again."

Her tear-filled eyes were begging for belief, and now Buck saw that there were no traces of terror in them; only grief, and something else that made his heart leap.

Gradually he pieced together what she was trying to tell him. She had gone to work as a singer in the Tick-Tock Club in order to support her younger sister, Irene, whom she adored. Accidentally Palmieri had learned that she was acquainted with Martin Kirby, then her sister had mysteriously disappeared.

"Palmieri promised to help me find her," she gasped out her story. "Then he claimed that he had located her and said that he would get her back, that he would save her from a dreadful life if I would do as he told me. He had to have a talk with Mr. Kirby, he told me. But Mr. Kirby would not see him so I was to ask him to come down to the Tick-Tock to meet me.

"I telephoned and made the engagement with Mr. Kirby. But I had no idea that they were going to murder him! After that terrible shooting they put me in a car and drove me to Scranton, to the Big Town Club. They kept me there by threatening Irene if I tried to leave. I was helpless. I had to do

whatever they told me. That's why I telephoned to you when they ordered me to. But they promised me that it was only to get Roeding's statement from you. They promised that you would not be hurt!"

Over her shoulder Buck Neville glimpsed the tear-stained, fragilely beautiful face of her sister. With fists clenched he raised up on his elbows before the interne grabbed him and gently forced him back on the stretcher.

Through him surged a burning desire to get his hands on Ugo Palmieri, a desire that had nothing to do with his duty as a member of Uncle Sam's most efficient force of crook-catchers.

"Easy — easy," the white-uniformed medical man protested. "You have done all you can to Palmieri. When the police dragged him out of that armored car you wrecked he was dead—neck broken in the crash."

He *was* tired, Neville admitted as they lifted him into the ambulance and Louise Monroe climbed in beside him. He was tired, and now there was no reason why he should not relax and yield to the delicious languor that was stealing over him.

With Louise's story and what he had discovered in the liquor drop, a mystery that had baffled the Bureau was clear to him. There had been no leak from the Governor's office or anywhere else. Martin Kirby had not been killed because of his impending appointment as special vice prosecutor, but because of his activities in behalf of the oil companies he represented.

As attorney for the combine, Kirby had been hot on the track of Ugo Palmieri's fake trucks and the gas stations to which they delivered their loot—dummy stations that were actually fences for their stolen merchandise. To put an end to Kirby's activity before he exposed and broke up their racket Palmieri had put him on the spot—not knowing that the very next day Kirby was to have resigned his job and turned his energy in another direction!

Well, Palmieri had paid for Martin Kirby's murder, and with Louise's testimony Heavy Zimmer would go to the electric chair for his part in the ruthless killing. Martin Kirby was avenged, and the gang that had been looting piers and warehouses for months had been broken up.

Federal Agent Neville grinned—a grin that stayed on his swollen, plaster-decorated features even after he fell asleep. Tomorrow he would report to his chief — as a G-man should report!

●

Next Issue: THE BLACK SEAL OF DEATH, *a Novelet of Crime's Legion, by* G. T. FLEMING-ROBERTS

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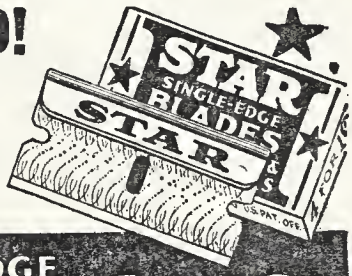

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FOR GEM AND EVER-READY RAZORS

DOOM DOWN STAIRS

Johnson, Private Sleuth, Sets the Bait for a Perfect Death Trap!

By

ROBERT SIDNEY BOWEN

Author of "Murder Takes Wing," "Proof Indigo," etc.

BENHAM looked at me appraisingly. "So it took you four years to realize what I said was true! And now you're coming to me for a job. What am I supposed to do, fall on your neck with joy?"

Benham's eyes were neither friendly nor hostile as he stared at me across his mile-square desk. But I knew that inside he was giving me the great big I-told-you-so horse laugh, and loving every chuckle. You see, four years ago he'd offered me a good opening in the Benham Detective Agency he was getting under way at the time, and I had turned him down. And done it because I'd figured that I'd get places faster by sticking as detective, third grade, on the local force. I was wrong, though. Being a dope at playing the political game, I'd stayed behind the eight-ball for four years, and finally resigned. And now I was trying to work the rain-check on Benham.

He stepped in to belt me in the jaw with his fist

"No," I said, "just give me a chance in your outfit. I'll make good. These four years haven't been exactly wasted. I've learned lots of things I didn't know when you first offered me a job."

"I wouldn't bet on it," he grunted, and cocked an eye at the paper knife he balanced on his forefinger. "Once a cop, always a cop."

"How about yourself?" I shot back at him. "You were on the force once yourself."

"But it didn't take me four years to realize I was carrying the ball for the other team," he snapped. Then, scowling, "I don't know, Windy, things have changed a lot since this outfit cracked its first case. Our clients are mostly the upper crust. You don't handle that crowd with brass knuckles and rubber hose."

"Maybe that's why I got off the local force," I argued.

"Maybe. Yes, you used to have brains, even though you always did talk too much. Tell you what, I'll think it over. Drop in at the end—"

THE phone buzzer stopped the rest. Benham took the call and grunted "yes" and "no" a couple of times and then hung up.

"You don't have to think it over," I said. "I can take the final word, now. There are other jobs in this town, believe it or not."

"I have thought it over, Windy," he smiled. "I'll give you a chance. A trial, anyway. That was Sylvia Manners on the phone. You know, next in line for the Manners Canned Fruits millions when her mother dies. She's one of our regular clients. We handle anything and everything for her." He paused and drew a hand over his mouth.

"She has a wire-haired terrier named Cinderella of Sussex, Cindy for short. It's lost. Go out to the house and get a description of the mutt, and the facts, and find it for her. Here, this will identify you as working for us."

Benham tossed one of his agency shields across the desk. My first thought was to toss it back at him with advice on what to do with it, but just as suddenly I killed the notion. Benham was nobody's fool, and he'd built up a business that had put a lot of money in his bank account and a lot of good publicity in the papers. And that hadn't been accomplished by luck. I mean, he was one smart guy, and he surrounded himself with men who were just about on a par. In other words, he wasn't trying to give me a rib. He was sending me out to locate a rich dame's lost pup to see if I could take picayune stuff in my stride. No detective agency gets a big-shot murder every day, you know.

And so I nodded, pocketed the shield and headed for the door. One of Benham's top men chuckled as I went by and made the yap-yap sound of a dog. But I took that, too, and kept on going.

It took me about forty minutes to drive out to the Manners place on the outskirts of town. And it took me another five minutes to go up the drive to the front door. The house was a small nine or ten-room affair that rambled a bit, with a four-car garage adjoining on the right. But the grounds were big enough to stage a major-sized war on, and still not bother the nearest neighbor.

Parking my car I went along the front veranda and stabbed the bell button. It was midsummer and there was just the screen door between me and the inside of the house. I didn't get any answer to three or four jabs of the bell, so I tried my knuckles on the door. That didn't work, either, and I was just about to let them know in a loud voice I was there, when suddenly I let the shouting slide.

I had leaned close to the screening and my mouth was opening to announce myself when I saw the foot and about six inches of the silk-stockinged leg sticking out from behind a corner of the hall inside, and to my left. The screen door wasn't locked; so in I went, fast. The woman was sprawled out on her face on the floor, at the foot of the stairs leading up to the second floor. She was as dead as they make 'em;

from a broken neck, was my first guess. And she was Sylvia Manners' mother.

The body was still warm, and I didn't need any guesses to realize that a nose dive down the stairs had done the trick. The face was battered a bit where she'd done some bouncing on the way down, and some of her white hair was turning a glistening crimson from a nasty split bruise on her right temple.

Just in case, I made sure that she was through; then I shouted a couple of times to attract the servants. No soap. There was no one about. Using the hall phone, I called Benham and reported to him, and then put through a call to the local coroner. Then I made a tour of the house to dig out the servants. That was a waste of time. The lady and myself were the only ones in the place.

On my way back to the corpse to hold the death watch until the coroner or Benham showed up, I pulled up short at the head of the stairs and did some heavy staring at a rumpled rag rug about six feet back from the first step. That distance, about six feet, was really what caught my attention. Had it been closer to the first step, with maybe a corner of it hanging over, the answer would have been simple.

Some house owners spread rag rugs all over the place. More than once I've skidded on one that was too close to some stairs and have darn near gone down on my chops. But this rug was a good six feet from the first step, as I said. And so it was a cinch that she hadn't skidded on it and taken the dive. But when I bent down close and used my eyes plenty, it *did* begin to make sense. I mean, there were several scuff marks on the polished flooring, and although I never was good at crystal-ball reading and that sort of thing, I was willing to bet good money that there had been *two* persons that rumpled that rug. One was Mrs. Manners, and the other was someone who had wrestled her to the head of the stairs and given her the old heave-ho.

Figuring that out for myself, I started down the stairs just as a car came rolling up the driveway. When I reached the bottom, two women came in the screen door. One carried a wiggling wire-haired, and I recognized her as Sylvia Manners. That wasn't hard, of course, because you couldn't open the papers to the society pages without seeing a picture of her on a horse or a surf board, or heaven knows what. The lady with her I spotted as her private secretary or her mother's. She looked the part. Incidentally, why do private secretaries always wear glasses and tailor their skirts too long?

ANYWAY, Sylvia saw me, stopped short, and opened her mouth to demand who I was. Then she saw her mother. She made a funny little gasp, dropped the pup with a *plump*, and rushed across the hall.

"Mother!"

I stopped her as she was about to throw her arms about her mother.

"That won't help, Miss Manners," I said as soft as I could. "And you'd better not touch anything. The coroner's on his way. I found her like this when I came in. I'm Johnson, from the Benham Agency. I came in answer to your call about your dog. Here, sit down over there."

She was crying but not shedding any tears, if you get what I mean. Great big sobs that started at the bottom, but just didn't seem to get to the top. She let me lead her over to a chair and put her in it. Then she just sat there staring, frightened-eyed, at her dead mother. I looked at the other woman, and I guess she saw the question in my eyes.

"I'm Marion Simpson, Mrs. Manners' secretary," she said. "This is terrible!"

I couldn't argue about that, so I switched the subject.

"There don't seem to be any servants around. Aren't there any?"

"The cook's day off," she said, and couldn't seem to keep her eyes off the corpse. "Starke, the butler, was dismissed yesterday. A new one hasn't been hired yet. I've just come

from the employment agency. Tracey, the chauffeur, must be off with the town car, I guess. But, wait—must you let her lie there like that? Can't you do something? Oh, why did she try to come downstairs alone?"

"She didn't usually do it alone?" I echoed.

"No." The Simpson dame shook her head. "In fact, she hasn't been downstairs for weeks. Arthritis."

I heard more cars coming up the driveway, so I turned off my questioning. The Manners girl still sat in a daze. The wire-haired pup had jumped up into her lap and, as though catching on to what was what, the mutt was licking her hand. That seemed to snap the girl up a bit and she stroked the pup's neck and fingered the plain, round, woven-leather collar that had neither nameplate nor license tag. And then Hartney, the coroner, Inspector Brill, of the local cops, and Benham himself came barging inside.

With their entrance I became just about as important as maybe four square inches of the front door. Brill, who knew me, of course, wanted to know how the hell *I* came to be there. And when he got that information, he just scratched me off his list. Hartney busied himself with the dead woman, being the local medical examiner as well as coroner, and Benham spent his time trying to comfort the girl, who paid as much attention to him as Benham paid to me.

Finally Hartney straightened up and stuck his glasses back in his vest pocket.

"A broken neck," he said to Brill. "She's been dead about two hours. She got those bruises when she hit the steps on the way down."

As emphasis for that announcement, still another party came in through the front door. It was Tracey, the chauffeur; he had his uniform on. But in or out of a uniform, he had the perfect build for a right or left halfback on anybody's football squad. And a face that went with the build. He took us all in with a questioning glance, then saw the corpse. That jerked his head up.

"Mrs. Manners!" he let out. "What's happened, anyway?"

But nobody had to tell him, nor did he wait for the answer. He went quickly over to the Manners girl.

"Sylvia—Miss Manners, are you all right?"

The girl looked up at him, and there were real tears in her eyes this time.

"Oh, poor, dear Mother," was all she said.

Maybe it's the way I'm constructed, the reason why the gang nicknamed me "Windy" years ago, but anyway it's my habit to try and make a lot out of little things. And so, when I saw that Hartney and Brill were about to tab it a tough-luck accident and call it a day, I decided to ease myself into the picture.

"It might be a good idea, Chief," I said to Benham, "to find out where everybody was when Mrs. Manners had her fall. I don't think she was alone when she made it."

BENHAM shot me a look, glanced quickly at Sylvia Manners, and then gave me another look.

"Miss Manners has suffered enough," he snapped, "without your adding to it. Go on back to the office."

That made me get hot under the collar.

"Go up to the head of the stairs," I snapped back at him. "There's a rag rug rumpled up a good six feet from the top step. And there are scuff marks on the floor. Mrs. Manners had arthritis and never came downstairs alone. A woman her age, crippled with arthritis, could never *slip* on a rug six feet from the stairs and dive forward those six feet!"

Benham didn't make any reply, nor did Brill speak. They went up those stairs side by side, and stayed at the top about three or four minutes. When they came down there was guilty admission in Benham's eyes, and the big tramp wouldn't look at me. But there was fire in Brill's eyes, and he promptly opened up with the question barrage I'd suggested.

He began with the Manners girl.

She said that she'd been alone in the house with her mother at the time she'd called Benham. Ten minutes after that call, she'd received one herself from a bird over on the opposite side of town who had found her mutt. She'd hopped in her roadster and gone over there to get the dog. On the way back she'd picked up Marion Simpson, waiting at a bus stop, and brought her home.

The Simpson dame told what she'd told me; that she'd been down to the agency to interview a new butler. Brill leaped on that and wanted to know all about the old one. His name had been George Starke, and he'd been given the gate for sassing back at Mrs. Manners. None of the Manners household knew where he was at the time.

Tracey, the chauffeur, simply checked what the Simpson woman had told me. He'd taken the town car down to be fixed, done a few errands, and then taken the car for a check-up spin before coming on home. As he told his story, I somehow got to looking at the Simpson dame. She had her eyes fastened on Tracey, and there was four-alarm affection in those orbs, or I'm crazy. And I don't know why, but I looked at her hands, hanging limp at her sides. They were almost as big as a man's, and it was my guess that there was a lot of strength in them.

And then, suddenly, the balloon went up! I mean, Sylvia Manners snapped out of the semi-daze she'd been in, even when answering Brill's questions, and leaped to her feet. She shot out a stiff finger and jabbed it straight at the Simpson woman.

"*You* killed my Mother!" she screamed. "I see it all, now. You killed her. Your appointment wasn't until eleven o'clock, but you left here saying that you were going to the employment agency at ten! You didn't like my Mother because she wouldn't let you handle all of her affairs. Nor would I! And that little affair you had with Starke—oh, I knew about that, too! Mother was going to dismiss you, but you begged her to let you stay on. And you killed her, pushed my dear, darling Mother down those stairs, because you thought—you were afraid she'd leave you out of her will, not leave you the few dollars she'd arranged to, for what she had mistaken for faithful service. Oh, I despise you! I—I hope they put you in the electric chair!"

Quite an outburst, and it put us all back on our heels. The Simpson girl blinked a couple of times, and the red went way up to her ears. If I know what hate is, I saw it glitter in her eyes for a split second. Then it changed swiftly to patient scorn.

"I don't think you realize what you are saying, Miss Sylvia," she said stiffly. "The shock has been too much for you. It is quite true that I left the house at ten, but I did some shopping before I went to the agency. But I did *not* injure your mother in the slightest!"

THE Manners girl looked doped. Bill had moved close to her now, just in case she made a dive for the Simpson woman. But she didn't. She stood stiff and rigid, her blazing eyes fixed on the secretary.

"You—you back-stairs flirt!" she muttered. "You killed my dear Mother!"

What happened from then on for a while, I didn't see or hear. The old brain had began to hit on all six, and as I happened to look at Cinderella of Sussex, who had a what-the-hell-is-all-this look on her wire-haired face, a great big question mark came looming out of the blue and exploded with a bang in my head.

And so, while the others were waiting for the second round between the two women, I slipped out the front door and went over to my car. The Manners girl's sports roadster was parked in back of me. Behind it, in order, were Benham's coupé, Brill's police car and the Manners' town car. And all of them swell-looking buses, except my puddle-jumper. Anyway, I started to get into my bus; then stopped and took a look at the driveway in front of me. The old question mark exploded again, and so I got out and walked

down to the Manners' town car and back. By then, the old brain was whipping over fast.

Using the circle turn-around at the house end of the driveway, I went out to the main road and over across town to the Alpine Apartments. Sylvia Manners had said that a bird named Wilson, living in the building, had found her mutt. And he was the lad I wanted to see.

I found his name, Harry Wilson, on the mail-box panel and stabbed the button. There was an electric sound and a voice broke in.

"Yes?"

"That you, Wilson?" I called back at my end.

"Come on up, Chick," was the reply, and the heavy door latch started clicking.

I took a look at the apartment number, went inside and rode up to the top floor in the automatic elevator. A youngish and not bad-looking lad answered my ring at Apartment 610. He took a look at me, frowned.

"Was that you who rang downstairs?" he said. And, without waiting for my answer, "Thought it was someone else. What do you want? I'm not buying a thing, if that's the idea."

"I'm not selling," I said, and flashed Benham's badge. "I want to talk to you about a dog. Miss Sylvia Manners' dog."

A funny look flickered through his eyes, and if I hadn't started to walk in just like that, I think he would have tried to shut the door in my face.

"Oh, the dog," he sort of gulped. "Sure. What about it?"

I was inside by then, and the guy had to show me to a chair.

"Just routine stuff, Mr. Wilson," I smiled. "Miss Manners is one of our regular clients. You know her, I suppose?"

"Know her?" he echoed with a frown. "Why, yes—from pictures. I only met her the first time this morning when she came for her dog."

"Where'd you find the dog?" I asked.

"Why, a couple of blocks down the street," he said. "That is, it followed me home. That was early this morning."

"So you took it in, and called Miss Manners, eh?" I smiled.

"That's it," he nodded. "But if you think I want any reward, forget it. She offered me some money when she came this morning. I refused it. I was only too glad to be of service to Miss Manners. I've owned dogs, myself. I know how one feels when he loses his pet."

"Sure," I nodded back at him. "And you knew that Miss Manners would hot-foot it over here pronto when she learned you'd found her pup."

"Naturally," he said "So—"

"So you'd better tell me more, Wilson!" I snapped at him. "Who hired you to steal that dog and drag Miss Sylvia over here?"

He came up on his feet fast. *"Hired?"* he echoed. "What the devil are you raving about? I *found* that dog, you fool!"

"SIT down, Wilson," I told him evenly. "You're putting yourself out on the end of a limb, with nobody around to catch you. Mrs. Manners was found murdered this morning, a while after you called up about the dog."

He shook his head like a boxer in trouble, gaped at me.

"M-murdered?" he stuttered. Then, as though catching his second wind, "But what's that got to do with *me? I* didn't kill her!"

"What's the dog's name, Wilson?" I shot at him.

He seemed to be getting madder and more scared by the second.

"I don't know!" he shouted. "To hell with the damn hound! If I'd known it would cause me all this trouble, I'd have kicked it out! And now, you get out!"

"Who paid you to steal that dog?" I drummed at him. He came up on his feet again, eyes hard.

"Listen, Mister — er — whatever your name is," he grated, "I didn't steal any dog, and I don't know any-

thing about any murder. I've been right here in this apartment since early morning, and I can prove it. Now, clear out."

I got up and shrugged. "Okay, Wilson," I said, "I was just trying to give you a break. You can tell your story to the cops, if you'd rather. Let's get going."

He sort of paled at that. "Get going where?" he demanded. "What do you mean?"

"Just what I said," I told him. "You're in a spot, and there's murder been done. You never met Miss Sylvia Manners until today. You don't even know her dog's name. But you tell me you found it this morning and called her up to tell her you'd found it. Get smart, Wilson! How did you know it was *her* dog?"

He did that punch-drunk shake of his head again. "Why," he began, floundering around, "why, er—from the tag on its collar, of course."

I reached out to take his arm. "Let's go, Wilson," I said. "There wasn't any tag or license plate on that dog's collar. That's just what brought me over here to see you. Get your hat." And I pulled out my gun.

Maybe I've got too grand an opinion of my speed in the tight corners, or maybe I figured him to be more stunned than he was. Anyway, the next thing I realized, he had slapped my hand aside and stepped in close, to belt me on the jaw with his fist. And it might just as well have been the side of the building as far as remaining on my feet was concerned. I hit the floor hard and I must have bounced a foot.

But I didn't go out for the count. Four years on any police force don't exactly make a creampuff out of a lad. I came back up on my knees on the second bounce and dived for his legs as he started out of the apartment in high gear. I stopped one of his feet with my sore chin and he kept going on his way. Maybe it's living up to my nickname to say that I could have clipped him with the gun as he went through the door. But I think I could have, only I didn't. I drilled a shot into the wood at the top of the door, as it was slamming shut.

"Hold it, Wilson!" I roared.

He didn't, of course, and when I got out into the hall he was tearing for the stairs at the far end, the fire-exit stairs. For the second time I could have nailed him, but I was a private dick and I knew *he* didn't do the killing. I could get myself into a mess of trouble, should I drill one too close to his heart and knock off a man who could be proved an accessory before the fact in a murder case. I wanted him all in one piece, but I didn't want to have to smoke through the whole town to find him. And so I threw down my gun as though taking a bull's-eye bead on him.

"Stop, Wilson!" I barked. "Stop where you are, or I'll shoot!"

He took a flash glance back over his shoulder just as he reached the stairs, saw my gun and started to jump in an effort to beat my bullet around the corner of the exit stairwell. He couldn't have slipped more if there'd been a rag rug at the top of those steps. One foot went out from under him and came up to a level with his head. In the perfect pose of a fullback getting off a long punt, he sailed off the top step and pitched downward.

WHEN I reached the stairs, he was in a heap on the landing, about twelve steps down, and out like a light. By that time, my shot inside the apartment and my yelling in the hall had started people popping their heads out of doors on both floors; Wilson's and the one below. They all crowded around, and one of them turned out to be a doctor. After an examination of Wilson, he added up a broken right wrist, a possible fracture of the skull, plus whatever internal injuries there might be. I sent someone for the cop on the corner, identified myself, and told the cop to get the ambulance and to take charge.

Then I went down in the elevator and jumped into my car and burned up the streets across town to the Manners home. So help me, I don't think anybody had ever changed position since I'd left. They were still all in the hall, and Brill was talking to the Simpson woman as I came in. He stopped to glare at me. Benham spun around and gave me the angry eye, too.

"Where have you been?" he demanded.

"Checking up," I said. Then, ignoring him, I went over to Sylvia Manners. "Was your car in the garage when you went to drive after your dog?" I asked.

"Yes, it was," she nodded.

"Thanks," I said, and looked across at Tracey. "Was the town car in the garage, too, when you took it to be fixed?"

"Yes," he nodded also. "Why?"

"And you didn't bring it back until after we had arrived, eh?" I popped at him.

His eyes sort of tightened at the corners, but he shook his head.

"I've already said I did some errands and then took the car for a test spin," he said. "You can check that up easy enough. I stopped at the Holland gas station over by the Heights."

"You probably did," I said. "That's over near the Alpine Apartments, where you stopped off to give the dog to your friend Harry Wilson to keep for a spell."

"I don't know any Harry Wilson," he snarled. "What are you driving at?"

"That you came back here when you knew Mrs. Manners would be alone," I shot at him, "and heaved her down the stairs. Why? Because she shut down on your playing up to her daughter!"

"Oh, Chick, you *didn't!*"

Sylvia Manner's face was as white as a sheet of paper, and her eyes were sticking out a mile as she stared at Tracey.

"Chick, eh?" I echoed. "That's what Wilson called me before he knew who I was. So you did drop the dog off there. And you told Wilson to call Miss Manners and get her out of the house so you could come back."

"You lie!" Tracey snarled again. "I didn't—"

"Shut up!" Brill stopped him, and then planted his big feet in front of me. "What's all this anyway? What made you go over and see this Wilson, and how do you know Tracey came back here for the murder? Speak up!"

I GAVE Brill the hard eye, looked at Benham, and shrugged when he gave me the nod.

"Okay," I said. "There's no tag or license on that dog's collar. I wondered how Wilson knew it was Miss Manners' dog. So I went over there. He'd never met Miss Manners, and he didn't even know the dog's name. And he didn't have an answer for my question of 'how come.' He took a dive down the fire stairs trying to get away from me. He's on his way to the hospital now, I guess. The cop on that beat can tell you which one. When he comes to, I think he'll admit friendship with Tracey. He lied a lot to me, but he'll tell you plenty, I think. He's scared stiff. When I told him of the murder, he damn near fainted."

"But why Tracey?" Brill demanded. "Can you prove he came back here?"

"I can," I came right back at him. "Take a look at the tire tread of Miss Manners' car, and look at the tread of the town car Tracey was driving. Then look at the driveway at the garage end. You'll see the diamond prints of Miss Manners' tires down the driveway a few yards, until they are *blotted out* by the circle marks of Tracey's town car tires, which were made when he came back and parked his car *after* Miss Manners had left. Go on out and take a look."

"I will," Brill grunted, and dived out the door. "All of you wait right here."

"You beast, you rotten, filthy beast! So it was her you really

wanted all the time. And you swore that you loved only me. Oh!"

The Simpson woman had whirled on Tracey, and if I ever saw a tigress in skirts, she was it—and how! Up went that big hand of hers and she gave him an awful slap across the mouth.

"Here, none of that!" Benham barked and stepped forward.

That was a wrong move for my new boss. Tracey had added up the score in those few seconds and knew that his team wasn't even going to get to first base. As Benham reached for the Simpson woman, Tracey smashed his right into Benham's face, then grabbed the Simpson woman and hurled her after the boss. Both of them came flying across the hall to slam up against me before I could dodge. So we all went down in a heap.

I scrambled out first and saw Tracey cutting across the living room and diving toward some French doors. I didn't pull my punches on him. I mean, I was on my knees when I had my gun out, and I shot from that position. My first slug got him in the hip, but damned if he didn't keep on going. My second, though, caught him square in the knee, and he folded up like an army cot.

Well, ten minutes later, Benham and I left the place. We could have waited for all the details, but they were easy to guess. It was the old story. A rich dame and the handsome chauffeur are "that way" about each other, but Mother says, "The hell you will!" The chauffeur is a flourflusher, anyway, playing two girls at the same time, so pushing the old lady off the cliff of life does not bother him much. Not when the Manners' Canned Fruits millions go with the girl when he marries her. It was tough on the Manners kid, though, and I felt plenty sorry for her. But women are goofy anyway, to my way of thinking, so maybe she didn't take it too hard.

Sure I said goofy. Listen—as Benham and I went out, the Manners dame was in the Simpson dame's arm, having a good cry for herself. Only half an hour before she'd been hoping the cops would fry the Simpson woman, and now she was borrowing her shoulder for the water works! So I ask you—is this the business, or isn't it?

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IN THE NEXT ISSUE

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RING OF THE DEVIL

A Narcotic Agent Novel

By WESTMORELAND GRAY

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Fate Steps in When Tom Lennox Misreads the Figures of the Grim Accountant!

His light swept around the room, then stopped suddenly as if in sentient horror

Death Doctors the Books

By CYRIL PLUNKETT

Author of "The Way to Doom," "Cat Killer," etc.

MAIN STREET crouched in early dusk, and Lennox could feel the nervous, jerky pounding of his heart. He was wondering constantly this past month what Correy and Dave Drake would *do*, and it was driving him to desperation.

Plodding, shoulders drooping, thin face haggard beyond his forty years, Lennox cursed the night and the two men who had made all his nights torture. Even the street itself had a forlorn, worried, anxious look; and it struck him suddenly that the stores seemed to be holding their breath. He paused, shivering, aware then of a figure in the shadows behind him.

But it wasn't Correy this time; it

was Dave Drake, laughing. Lennox turned sharply away, instantly taut, alarmed.

"No, you don't Lennox," Drake said, and swung along beside him.

He was taller than Lennox by at least three inches; and younger by ten years. The newspapers had stated that Dave Drake played football with some eastern professional team, doubling through the winter in the ring as a wrestler. He looked it—wide shoulders, thick neck, blunt face.

But there was nothing blunt about his eyes. They were gray and hard and sharp. Reckless—that was the keynote about him, the thing that made Lennox shiver.

THEY walked a hundred steps in silence. Then Dave began to whistle a tune Lennox hated. "Down by the Old Mill Stream." Paige Drake, Dave's brother, had always whistled that piece. Having been in business with Paige for five years, Lennox had heard it a million times.

"Look here, Drake—" he cried at last.

"I'll do the talking," Dave cut in. "You've had your month, the month I gave you. It's over tonight, at midnight. I'll be waiting for you until the clock strikes twelve, Lennox, and unless you come clean—"

"Damn you, I—"

"Shut up! The only words I want from you is a confession that you killed my brother."

"You're crazy!" Lennox snarled. "The verdict was accidental death. It was a good verdict."

"You went to see Paige that night, and he was asleep in the bath tub," Dave went on relentlessly. Their footsteps seemed to slap the sidewalk in rhythm with each word. "A habit he had, dozing in the tub. All you had to do was palm an ounce or so of water onto the gas heater, smothering its flame. That and *lock* the door! The gas did the rest."

"I tell you you're insane!" Lennox cried. "He splashed the water out of the tub with his foot while he was asleep. The door wasn't locked except to anyone trying to get *in*, the inside latch."

"No?" Dave chuckled grimly. "But how about the other lock *beneath* the knob? Any skeleton key would have turned it. *Yours* did. You came back two hours later, *unlocked* it again, called police when you smelled gas and naturally couldn't get in. You collected thirty-five thousand bucks on a policy payable to the business. You knew Paige was drawing out of the business; you knew you faced ruin once he did."

"I tell you—" Lennox started to say thickly.

"I'm doing the talking, Lennox. I'm getting you for murder if it's the last thing I ever do. You've got a little more than five hours left to think it over. Midnight tonight, or else—" He stopped, and the two men faced each other. Drake's eyes were glaring, bright, like little unwinking spotlights.

Lennox realized then, dully, that after tonight Dave Drake would stop at nothing. Not even murder.

It seemed almost as though they stood there hours, days, staring at each other. It seemed almost as though the past month lived again. Dave, square-jawed, ever pounding at him, snarling accusations, hinting the time would inevitably come for something more. Lennox had awakened at nights believing Dave was in his room. He'd dreamed of Dave's powerful young hands closing around his throat. He'd walked in the evenings, watchful of each dark hallway, each alley—expecting, waiting, wondering, becoming frantic. Always he saw Drake, or Correy, the man who simply watched and smiled insinuatingly.

Lights blazing on across the street made Lennox blink. He swung around, startled, saw the lights were on a theater marquee. The winking bulbs spelled, in part, *Kali-Mystic.*

The theater was refuge. And Kali, who could look into the future. Lennox stumbled across the street, quickly bought a ticket and entered the theater. Here, at last, Dave couldn't taunt him.

He wondered, though, if Dave had followed him.

The picture had no meaning. Worry was a thing you could stand just so long. Paige Drake's death had seemed perfect. And yet, Dave Drake *knew*. It had happened the way he'd said. Not exactly a planned murder, but considered nonetheless.

Paige Drake had lived alone in one half of a duplex he owned near the edge of the city; the other side was unrented. Lennox had gone so far as to duplicate a key to the front door. The rest simply happened.

Calling on him unexpectedly, entering when Paige Drake didn't answer the first soft rap, Lennox had heard water running from an open tap upstairs. He'd gone on up, knowing Drake's habit of dozing in the bath. The bathroom door was open, gas burner alongside the tub. It hadn't taken more than a minute to set the stage, slip the catch on the inside of the door, lock that door then from the outside.

Lennox had been certain no one had seen him enter; he'd made sure no one saw him leave. For two hours, until midnight, he'd carefully built up an alibi. At midnight he'd phoned Paige Drake's house from the club and got no answer. Five men testified to that at the inquest, to Lennox's calling a taxi to go investigate. The cab driver naturally had waited at the door while he went in and unlocked the bathroom door.

Everything had been perfect—accidental death the verdict. And then Dave Drake came along to settle the estate. And Dave insisted his brother had had a phobia against shutting doors upon small rooms because he'd been locked in a closet once as a child and had never forgotten it. He swore that Paige Drake wouldn't have locked himself in that bathroom and then gone to sleep on a bet.

Suspicion was not proof by a long shot. Damn it, he was safe, Lennox told himself in the darkened theater. Unless Dave Drake killed him—unless—

The feature picture ended suddenly, and Kali, the Mystic, came upon the stage. Lennox drew up mentally, felt his hands grow moist. He waved to an usher, accepted pad and pencil to ask his question, looked around once, sheer habit—and saw Correy two rows back of him. Correy's gaze locked with his.

A big man, Correy, red-faced and square-jawed. No one in town seemed to know who he was, beyond his name. But he was always turning up, like tonight. For more than two weeks Lennox had suspected Correy's trade to be that of a detective. The damnable part of it was that Correy seemed not to care that Lennox knew he followed him.

LENNOX wriggled in his seat, his heart pounding. He felt backed to the wall. Kali, with his mystic page from the future, seemed like a straw waiting to be grasped. He'd always half believed in astral influences and the like. Perhaps Kali *might* be able to assure him, might tell him "the problem" bothering him would come out right. But now he realized even this possible solace was denied him. He didn't dare admit concern before the grinning Correy.

He sat huddled and shaking, Kali's slender, turbaned figure a blur upon the stage. Kali's droning voice spoke of aspects, favorable and otherwise.

"January 26th," Kali was saying in answer to someone's question. "The time now, tonight, is favorable to you, to anyone born this day."

Lennox sat up straight. What was this? Why, *he* was born in January, on the 26th! His heart began pounding again. Could this amazing coincidence be an omen? *Tonight! Now!* He couldn't sit still longer, and he got up, edged into the aisle. Over his shoulder he saw Correy moving to follow him, and Lennox almost ran from the theater.

The fog had closed down, thick and black. But eagerly Lennox hastened home. When he got to his apartment he found that his door had been forced. Inside, the bed was ripped apart, drawers stood open. Every nook and cranny of his suite had been searched!

The warm flush came first, like the mist outside, a haze of bitter passion. It was born of the fact that this was his night, his destiny, and that Dave Drake would be waiting until midnight. It swept away all caution, all doubt. Dave Drake had to die! It no longer mattered how Drake's death came about, just so he died.

It was surely Drake who had searched the apartment. What he had hoped to find, heaven alone knew. There wasn't anything he could find. But constant failure would only spur him to new efforts, and Lennox remembered his mighty shoulders, his strong arms and hands. They were closing in. They'd have to be stopped; they *would* be stopped.

The fog laved his windows. He could move like a shadow in that fog, and reach the Drake house again as he had that other night a month before. He still had his key to the Drake door. Whatever the espionage of the past month, it had never extended through the night.

CORREY was quartered at one of the local hotels. So much Lennox had already learned. Dave Drake, like his brother before him, lived now alone in the gloomy duplex. *After* twelve, he would be asleep.

Suicide through despondency would be the verdict this time. He'd steal upon Dave Drake as he slept, slit his thick throat, his wrists. The knife would be from Drake's own kitchen. Lennox wouldn't have an alibi, true, but then that would speak for, not against him. It would argue against premeditation. And whatever Correy might suspect, he'd have no proof. The more Lennox thought of it, the surer he became. It was plainly action tonight or never.

Outside, the fog licked his face like a caress. It clutched him in a cold but steady mantle. When he came to the Drake house it was dark and silent. He unlocked the door, stole inside, paused then, listening. But there was still no sound, and he chanced a pencil flash to guide him safely to the kitchen.

The knife was almost like a razor, Lennox thought gleefully. His gloved hands clutched it, and carefully he retraced his steps, on up the stairs.

The first bedroom was empty, unused. The second had clothing thrown carelessly about it, but it, too, was empty. Lennox began to chill, to worry. He went downstairs again, flashed the light into the living room. It swept through the archway, around a room, picked up a desk—stopped suddenly as if in sentient horror.

Dave Drake hung half over that desk. Papers were strewn around him. A knife, blood-stained, similar to the one Lennox carried, lay upon the floor. But it wasn't the knife that held his gaze. It was the telephone, receiver off, near Drake's one outstretched hand. It was the hand itself, crimson-stained also, *and what that hand had written.*

One scrawled word, in blood, across the polished desk top. *Lennox.*

Almost instantly there were footsteps outside. The door was flung open, and lights flashed on. Correy stood there, gun in hand. Behind him was a uniformed patrolman.

"Freeze, damn you!" Correy snarled.

Lennox stood transfixed, ice in his veins, throbbing ice that robbed him of all feeling, all volition. The police officer shouldered past, came to the archway, gasped.

"He's in there, *dead!*"

"I told you, didn't I?" Correy panted. "I got this call at my hotel from Dave. He was dying. He said Lennox had stabbed him, left him for dead. He—"

Lennox screamed then, shrilly. "But I didn't kill him! I just came in and found him—"

"Drop that knife!" Correy snapped.

Lennox looked down, saw he still clutched the weapon. He saw something else. No hope this time. Dave Drake, reckless, viewing midnight and failure to all his plans, had determined to make Thomas Lennox pay for his brother's death if it cost him his own life. *He had killed himself to frame the man he hated!*

It was ghastly, fantastic, horrible. But it was true. And it had come so suddenly, so unexpectedly, that behind it was a pile-driving realization that arguments, pleas, legal wiles, would go for nothing. And they'd caught him, moreover, unlawfully entered, armed—good God, no jury on earth would doubt the evidence!

Lennox got rid of the knife, but he didn't drop it. It went streaking straight at Correy's broad chest. Correy's gun roared. There was a startled bellow from the patrolman, already beyond the archway. But report and bellow only served to lend Lennox a mad strength. Correy dodged the flashing knife, but his body was off balance. His shot went wild, and Lennox hit him then. Correy struck the wall, and Tom Lennox was on through the doorway, running with the devil's own speed.

Flame stabbed thrice the night. Whistling lead cut close to his flying figure before the fog could swallow him. He came to the street, cut back through protective shrubbery. There was an alley, dark and wavy with mist. And then other silent, eerie streets. Lennox ran until he could no longer breathe.

He couldn't go back home. They'd check his suite first thing. He had no car, little ready money to effect a real getaway. All roads leading from the city would be quickly closed. He felt tears streaming his hot cheeks, heard his own choked and sobbing voice, moaning, "Cornered, *cornered!*"

There was nothing now for him to do. He'd killed Paige Drake and gone free; he hadn't touched Dave Drake, but death and Drake had doctored the books, written Lennox down as a murderer.

He reached the downtown area, saw a cheap hotel loom close ahead. He stumbled towards it, grateful for its temporary security. For the moment, at least, his face would be unknown here, whereas the foggy streets spelled constant danger, menace from police who were already surely searching.

The clerk yawned and took his money, glanced indifferently at the name Lennox used in registering. The clerk had a radio playing softly behind the desk. Lennox, collar up, shuffling through the dim hallway, worried about that radio. They would broadcast his description. They'd cover the hotels—

The bellhop unlocked his door, withdrew, and Lennox began to shiver. Alone, the room's very silence conspired to taunt him.

"Damn Dave Drake," he muttered. And stood trembling then, fearful someone had heard. But only the steady silence answered him, and he went on muttering breathlessly, imploringly. "I've got to do something. I've *got* to fight back!"

THE tension built up all the past four weeks, from the time he *had* killed Dave's brother Paige, had completely snapped, and in its place was only a disorganizing terror.

There was a little desk, paper, pen. Horror seemed to indicate but one course. Alive, the world would believe Dave Drake's last written word. But were he, Thomas Lennox, dead —wouldn't they believe him then, too? In some vague way, life itself was now less important than defeating the man he'd feared these many days.

"Cheat the chair!" began to drum through his brain, and he wrote with nervous, flying fingers. Writing seemed to help. It was like telling someone his side of the story, the nearest thing to comfort he could gain. He wrote:

Dave Drake died a lie. I did not kill him. His brother, yes, but not Dave.

He continued writing, setting down all that had happened the night Paige Drake had been murdered. And suddenly he heard footsteps in the corridor.

They went softly past his door, returned a moment later. Lennox dropped the pen, forgot the scribbled paper.

"*The radio!*" he gasped. "The clerk must have identified me!"

His gaze swept the room, lighted

on the closet, then the bed, the sheet. He stumbled across the room, ripped the sheet free, reached the closet as a knock sounded loudly.

"They won't take me," he chattered in the closet. And his fingers worked furiously, tearing the sheet, tying it around a hook high on the wall, knotting a loop around his neck.

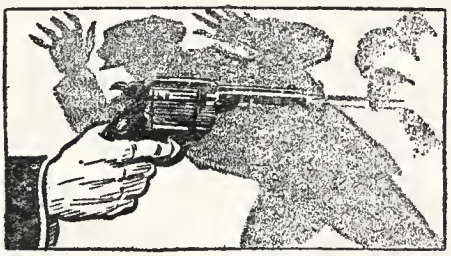
"Lennox," a voice called. "You'd better open up. We've got you, Lennox."

He cursed them, screaming words that ended in a hoarse gurgle as a key turned in the lock. The door swung in, and Tom Lennox threw the weight of his body upon his make-shift rope. There was a sharp crack within his neck, and a black, tumultuous curtain descended over him.

But through its last agonizing rift, Lennox saw four men enter. Correy, gun drawn, with two patrolmen. The fourth man made Lennox's final gasp a hopeless shudder—Dave Drake, grim-faced, shirt and coat still oddly stained with blood.

Lennox didn't see Drake pounce upon the scrawled confession. Nor hear him say:

"The fool fell for it and tricked himself!"



LAWLESS VIGILANTES STRIKE TERROR

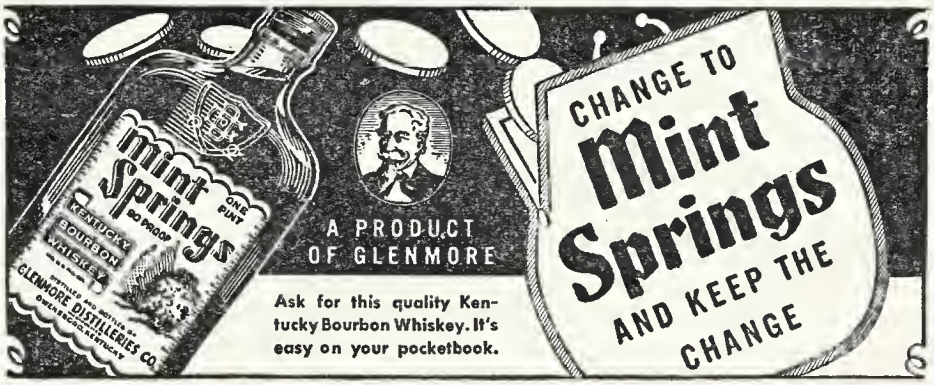
in

THE BLACK SEAL OF DEATH

A Gripping Complete Novelet

By G. T. FLEMING-ROBERTS

—*in the Next Issue of* POPULAR DETECTIVE



FRAME FOR A LADY

A Complete Novelet of Murder Mystery

By

CLEVE F. ADAMS

Author of "This Is Murder," "Song of Hate," etc.

CHAPTER I

MURDER AT THE BEL AIR

FLAGG was draped over one end of the bar at Luigi's when the girl came in. It wasn't late, somewhere around ten o'clock, and the place should have been crowded, but apparently it was an off night, wet and cold outside, and there hadn't been a customer for over an hour.

Luigi, fat, olive face creased with annoyance because he preferred arguing with Flagg to hearing the tinkle of the cash register, went up along the bar to see what the girl wanted. She sailed right by him, directly up to Flagg who was experimenting with a new Flagg Special. This time it was a concoction of five different liqueurs, including absinthe, and she eyed the array of bottles with patent distaste.

"Nicholas Flagg, you're drunk!"

"I never argue with ladies," he said amiably, not turning, but holding the finished product aloft and admiring the light refractions. "You are a lady, I trust?"

"I won't be," she said angrily, "if you don't put that darned thing down and quit clowning around." And then, a sudden little catch in her voice, "Oh, Nick, don't you remember me?"

He turned and looked down at her. "Sheila?" He put down his

Sheila Carmody is Catapulted into a Grim

Sheila took a back dive onto the bed and Nick started to turn

drink very carefully on the bar, and then, whooping like a kid, he grabbed her by the shoulders and whirled her over to the nearest booth.

"The squirt, as I live and breathe!" He laughed gayly. "Howzit, keed? What brings you back home?"

Her eyes clouded. "Mother is dead, Nick, and so—well, I didn't have anybody else but Dad. I just sort of came back."

He scowled, remembering. Let's see, it must be around five or six years, now, since Big John and his wife had split up. Naturally, with Big John Carmody's rep at that time, the courts had given the custody of Sheila to the wife.

Six years!

Flagg stared down at the girl. Park Avenue, all right, even if she was Big John's kid. Park Avenue, and too grown up to be called "the squirt" any more. Suddenly abashed, he released her. "Sorry, kitten."

"For what, Nick?" She gave him the old swift grin he remembered so well. "You haven't even kissed me yet." And then, as he frowned, she added, "Oh, I almost forgot. Father wants to see you."

He stiffened. "Why?"

Crime Jig-Saw that Defies Solution!

"Because," she answered calmly, "he's in a spot of some kind."

Flagg laughed without humor. "Big John Carmody in a spot that I can help him out of? Now, look, kitten, your father is a grand guy, but he and I split up a long time ago. We just couldn't get along."

"I know, Nick. He told me you'd had trouble. That's why he sent me to find you. He knew you wouldn't come otherwise."

"I don't like that, Sheila," Flagg said. "Sending you out to do a job nobody else could do smacks of his damn politics; but I never thought he'd use his own daughter."

"He isn't using me, Nick. I offered to find you. Somehow he struck me as being a lonely old man in spite of his money, and his power, and that she-devil of a wife of his. I think you're the only man he ever trusted fully. He needs someone he can trust."

"So you met your stepmother, eh?" Flagg grinned. "A nice piece of work, Judith. Does she know he sent you after me?"

"I don't think so, Nick." She got up, laid a hand on his arm. "Then you'll come?"

"All right, kitten, I never could refuse you anything." He shrugged resentfully. "But just the same I think we're both being played for suckers. Did Big John tell you anything else?"

"He told me you were a private detective, the only honest one in the racket."

SHE took Flagg's arm in a firm grip, piloted him to the door.

In her cab, with the rain pounding down on the roof, and the million lights of Wilshire crawling past, he said in his gentle, whimsical voice, "You're not worried, or anything, are you, kitten?"

"Sort of," she admitted, adding fiercely: "What do I care what they say about Big John Carmody? He's my Father, isn't he? And even you admit he's a grand guy! Did I have any choice about leaving him? Did anybody consult me? No! Being under age I wasn't supposed to have any intelligence."

"What about your mother, kitten?"

"Look, Nick," she snapped. "Will you stop calling me by that asinine kid name? Can't even you realize that I'm a woman, and that— Oh, never mind, skip it. Mother? Oh, Mother was okay, only she had delusions of grandeur which somehow never materialized. I mean, everybody played her for a sucker as long as her money lasted, and when she finally went bust, she found out some of the facts of life and it killed her."

Flagg touched her arm furtively. "Sounds pretty hard, Sheila. You're more like Big John than I thought you'd be."

"Perhaps I am," she said, very low. "Perhaps we both remembered what a swell person Nick Flagg used to be." She turned in the seat, cupped a small palm under Flagg's chin and looked directly into his eyes. "Nick, can't you guess the real reason I came back?"

He shifted uncomfortably, looked out the window. "You're a big girl now, kitten. Uncle Nick can't paddywhack like he used to. Besides, I think the driver is looking."

She muttered something that sounded like "Damn!" but she moved over into her own corner and didn't say anything else till the cab drew up before the Bel Air.

The Bel Air was one of those vast co-operative apartments, owned by the tenants, each floor a separate unit of perhaps twelve or fifteen rooms. There was no clerk, only a doorman. When Flagg saw the bulge of a gun under the man's left arm, he got the idea that it would be tough crashing the Bel Air if you weren't wanted. The elevator man had a gun, too. On the tenth floor the elevator stopped and Sheila and Flagg got out.

The door in front of them was opening, very slowly, almost furtively, and then suddenly it was flung wide and the woman standing there began screaming bloody mur-

der. She was Judith Carmody, Big John's second wife.

"John's dead! He's all b-b-bloody! Oh, my God, they've killed him!" It went on and on, and yet the woman didn't appear to be screaming at Sheila and Flagg. Her wide eyes were blank, like a sleep-walker's.

Flagg shot a swift glance at Sheila's face, saw she was taking it like a trouper, and pushed past Judith Carmody into the apartment. He found Big John in the living room. He was dead, all right.

There had been quite a struggle apparently. A couple of heavy chairs were overturned and the drapes over one window were in shreds.

Big John Carmody lay on his side in front of the fireplace, sandy, partially bald head bashed in; and, as if this hadn't been enough, somebody had skewered his heart with a knife. There was hardly any blood. Judith Carmody's screams had faded to a low, monotonous moaning somewhere farther away than the foyer, and presently even that stopped, and then there was a light step behind Flagg. He whirled, trying to keep Sheila from seeing the grisly mess on the floor. Her face looked pinched, tired, but she could take it, this girl.

"Never mind, Nick," she said, as she went around him and stood looking down at her father's body. She made no effort to touch him. Flagg let her alone, wondering uncomfortably why there weren't any servants around. Had Judith called the cops? Probably not. You'd think, though, that with all that screaming somebody ought to be trying to crash in. There wasn't a sound except the slow tick of the electric clock on the big desk.

After a while Sheila turned and touched his arm lightly. Her dark eyes had a misty look, but she wasn't really crying.

"A grand guy, you said, Nick. Political big shot, notorious gambler, a racketeer if you can believe the papers, but a grand guy, eh? We ought to do something about it, don't you think?"

He put his arms around her. "We will, kitten, if that's what you want."

She pushed him away, looked up into his old-young face. Her own was set, and the angle of her jaw reminded him of Big John's.

"That's what I want, Nick."

"What about Judith?"

"Asleep, I hope. She took something out of a bottle, anyway. You notice anything funny about the way she began screaming?"

Flagg nodded. "I wish I knew what in hell to do with you, kitten. I'd like to look around before I call the law."

"Go ahead, Nick. I'll be quite all right."

He swung long legs through the apartment without finding anyone but Judith Carmody. She was on a chaise longue in her bedroom, had changed from street clothes to some sort of a frilly negligee, but she wasn't asleep. Her eyes were reddened, and Flagg, always the cynic, touched her balled handkerchief to see if it were wet. It was. Blue-eyed Judith had really been crying, then.

"Feel like talking, Mrs. Carmody?" he said, gently enough, though he didn't like her. "I judge you were out somewhere and came home and found John the way he is. Is that right?"

She began sobbing. "Oh, Nicholas, you're so hard. Must you look at me like that? Haven't you any feeling?"

HE STARED down at her, remembering that this woman had been the cause of his break with Big John. Six months after her marriage she'd begun making a play for Flagg, and Big John had walked in on them one day. There was nothing to it on Flagg's part; he'd never even liked the woman, but naturally Big John had misunderstood. Flagg had taken his cut of the Casino, spent it, decided to quit gambling and become a private detective. Big John Carmody had gone on up to the top.

"You haven't answered my question," Flagg said.

Her blue eyes hardened and she stopped sniffling, knowing from his tone that she wasn't getting anywhere with him.

"Where do you fit?"

"I'm acting for Sheila. Whether you know it or not, she's liable to be in a spot, and so are you. Maybe I'll be in one, myself. But if you'd rather talk to the cops it's okay with me."

SHE sat up. "What do you mean, I'm in a spot? My God, you don't think I did it, do you?"

"You're as good a guess as any. Why'd you wait until you saw the kitten and me before you went into your screaming act?"

"I didn't!" she flared. She sank back and began to sob again. "Oh, Nick, how do I know what I did? How can you torture me like this?"

He swung on his heel, saw Sheila standing there in the open door. Unaccountably he found himself flushing. He indicated the phone beside the bed.

"Better call Headquarters, kitten. Try for Lieutenant Sorensen, or anybody but that heel Hartigan. I want to have another look out back." He left the two women, went along the hall to the kitchen. Servants' night out, he guessed. There was a service elevator, door closed but unlocked. A fresh smear of blood marred the porcelainlike surface on the right hand jamb.

Flagg opened the door, looked down the shaft. All he could see was the top of the elevator, probably at ground-floor level. He couldn't be certain that whoever had left that smear of blood had gone out through this door.

There were only two other possibilities, though, presuming that Judith Carmody hadn't done the job herself—the passenger elevator and the built-in fire-escape chute. He located the panel to this last in the private hall and stared straight down into utter blackness. A guy could get down that way without any trouble, but he'd have a tough time getting up.

And yet the manner of Big John's death certainly indicated a man as the killer. A man or men. Those overturned chairs, the torn drapes, told of a struggle. Big John would not have had to battle that hard with Judith.

Somebody rang the front doorbell and Flagg went back the way he had come, through Judith Carmody's room. She was using the phone, keeping her voice very low. Sensing his presence she whirled, trying to cradle the phone behind her back.

"Whom were you calling, Judith?" Flagg asked sharply.

For a moment she was too frightened to be resentful. "Why—why, just one of the staff maids. I—I feel so helpless."

Flagg went over and took the phone out of her hand. The line sounded dead, but when he jiggled the instrument the operator downstairs cut in with, "Yes, Mrs. Carmody?"

"I'm speaking for Mrs. Carmody," Flagg said. "Will you get that number for me again?" Before the girl could answer, some instinct made Flagg swivel to look at Judith. He wasn't quite fast enough. She had a small onyx clock in her hand and when she hit him with it, it might just as well have been an anvil. He went down, dragging the phone with him.

CHAPTER II

SUSPECT NUMBER ONE

WHEN he finally got around to opening his eyes, he saw Sheila on her knees beside him. She'd been crying. Looking beyond her, Flagg saw fat Gus Keppler, Big John Carmody's partner. Just beyond Keppler was Hamilton Marx, the D.A., and just coming through the bedroom door was

Detective-lieutenant Ray Hartigan. Hartigan had a nasty look on his dark face, the kind he always got when he saw Flagg. He came over and hauled Sheila to her feet, scowled down at Nick.

"All right, lug, get the hell up. Thought you'd pull a fast one by getting somebody besides me, huh? Well, I spiked that. I'm in charge of this case from now on."

Flagg sat up slowly. After the room stopped whirling he got to his knees, then his feet, stood there propping himself against the phone stand. A little river of blood trickled down from where the onyx clock had gashed his temple. He got out a handkerchief, dabbed the cut, not saying anything. Marx, the prosecutor, and fat Gus Keppler didn't say anything either.

Hartigan, still holding Sheila by the arm, said, "She hit you, huh?" He leaned over the bed, picked up the little clock. "Like this, huh?" He went through the motions of sapping Flagg with the clock.

"Would you mind letting go of the kitten's arm while you do your daily dozen?" Flagg said mildly. "She didn't hit me, not with the clock nor with anything else, but if she had, it would be okay with me. Are you investigating a murder or a case of assault and battery?"

Gus Keppler said something to the D.A., rolled over on his short legs. "Flagg's right, Hartigan. This is no time to work off your personal grudges."

"The hell with that, Gus." Hartigan's jaw got stubborn. "What I want to know is why did this mug ask for Sorensen if he didn't have something to cover up? If the gal didn't conk him, who did?"

Keppler spread pudgy hands, and looked at Flagg. He had a round, good-natured face, round blue eyes, and there was a sort of chuckle in his voice, no matter what he was saying. Flagg had always liked Gus.

"There's no mystery about who hit me," Flagg said quietly. "Mrs. Carmody did it."

Everybody looked surprised. It seemed that Mrs. Carmody had vanished while Sheila was answering the door. Hartigan bellowed an order at somebody out in the living room, and a couple of dicks barged through the door, kept on going. They didn't find Judith.

Hartigan's sneer was triumphant. "She ain't here, see? She probably never was here. It's just a stall, though I'm damned if I see why the wren should conk him. They must've been working together. They came in together, didn't they?"

Flagg turned a blank look on Marx, the D.A. Marx was not so tall as Flagg, very slender, dressed to the point of foppishness, but a capable prosecutor so far as Flagg knew. It was rumored that he would be the next governor of the state.

"The girl dropped a packet of letters," he said. "Rather, she'd hidden them in her dress and they—well, they fell out at the wrong time. I'd say their contents were a pretty fair motive for murder."

"Of her own father?"

HARTIGAN grinned wolfishly. "Why not? Didn't Big John and her mother split up? Didn't her old lady keep writing him to send her money?"

Sheila looked at Flagg. Her eyes were ashamed, yet somehow defiant. "Believe me, Nick, I'd no idea Mother was asking him for money. I don't even know if he sent any. I just ran across the letters in his desk and thought—"

"This was after we found him, or before?"

"After," she said, very low. "While you were searching the apartment."

Flagg suddenly felt very tired. Had the kitten come back after all these years, not for a fond reunion with a grand guy, but for revenge for something Big John had done to her mother?

"What was in the letters?" he asked.

Hartigan again gave him that nasty grin. "As if you didn't know! Well, just in case that part of your

story is true, it seems the former Mrs. Carmody got rid of all the dough Big John settled on her. Along toward the last, she was even going hungry part time, to hear her tell it, and wouldn't Big John please send just a little to help out her and the gal? I'm betting he didn't send it, and when she finally ups and dies, the dame, here, comes back to sort of square accounts."

Flagg, feeling like a heel, looked at Sheila for corroboration. Her eyes were stony hard as they met his. They said, "So even you think I did it!" And then she turned and ran through the door to the rear hall.

Hartigan, caught off guard for once, came alive and started after her, but Flagg stuck out a foot and tripped him. Marx piled on top of Hartigan, and the two of them got tangled up long enough for Flagg to shoot a questioning glance at Gus Keppler.

THE fat man was making no effort to mix in. His round blue eyes looked mildly surprised, and one of them closed slowly in a prodigious wink. By the time Flagg had separated the struggling men, Keppler had turned and was staring out the window at the lights of the city below.

Hartigan, cursing a blue streak, glared at Marx. "I thought you was Flagg! What in hell you mean, tripping me?" He didn't wait for Marx's outraged reply, ran out in the hall, yelling for his men. "Down the hatch!" somebody roared. "She went down the fire chute. I heard her!"

Marx's lip curled. "Damned fool," he said in a stifled voice, and looked at Flagg. "Hartigan, I mean." He began straightening his disarranged clothing, like a ruffled peacock, but all the time he kept studying Flagg's face with his alert eyes. There was a lot of running back and forth in the hall; doors kept banging, and judging from the number of voices, Ray Hartigan must have brought a dozen men with him. It was so noisy outside that Flagg had to raise his tired voice a little to attract Keppler's attention.

"Gus, I don't mind telling you and Marx all there is to tell. I've no quarrel with the law, only with the way some of these mugs administer it."

Keppler chuckled his jolly, fat-man chuckle. "I'm not the law, boy. Just the same, Big John Carmody was my partner and a grand guy, to boot." The thought of Big John lying in the other room did something to his eyes. They still seemed to twinkle, but it was as if thick lenses had thrown them temporarily out of focus. "I guess it would be worth a guy's while to turn his killer up for me."

"Now, Gus, now Gus," Marx said nervously. "This kill is going to raise enough stink in the county without your turning a bunch of gorillas loose. The law will take care of it." He swung on Flagg. "As you were saying?"

Flagg gave him the yarn from the time Sheila had found him in Luigi's bar. "The kid couldn't have killed her father. The doorman and the elevator monkey will tell you she came in with me."

"Sure she did," said Hartigan, materializing like an evil genie in the doorway. "She did the job before she went out to find you, and then brought you back to help discover the crime."

Nick had thought of this one, himself. The story of Big John Carmody's being in a spot and wanting to see Flagg, had struck him as funny at the time. But, hell, he'd been so darned glad to see the kitten.

It could be, he decided, floundering around in circles.

After all, Sheila was as hard as Big John in a way; she could carry a grudge. And she was smart enough to know she'd need an alibi if she were found in town and any investigation were started. Only thing was, why hadn't she taken those damned letters before, instead of after she came back? Come to

think of it, he had only her own word for that.

Hartigan must have read the doubt in his face.

He said disgustedly, "Well, we'll pound it out of her when the boys pick her up."

Keppler lifted his big head. "She got away, then?"

"What do you think?"

"I think, my belligerent flat-foot, that you'd better lay off Flagg and let him solve this job for you."

"Like hell I will! Whadda you mean, solve it? It's solved, all but finding the dame, and I got a grand idea Nick Flagg can tell us where she is. I'm holding him."

Flagg intercepted a look between Gus Keppler and the district attorney. Marx coughed. "If you take Flagg in, Hartigan, I'll spring him on a writ, myself. You know I can do it."

Hartigan leered. "Custody of the D.A.'s office, eh? Boy, oh, boy, what a slush fund Carmody & Keppler must be putting up to elect you governor!"

"One of these days that big mouth is going to break you, Hartigan," Marx snapped.

"But I'll still be an honest cop when it does!"

"Or a dead one," Gus Keppler said in his chuckling voice. "Now look, what's the use of all this argument? We all want the same thing —Big John's murderer. Well, let's go get him."

"Her," Hartigan insisted sullenly.

"All right, which her?" Keppler gave Flagg a level stare. "Was that straight stuff about Mrs. Carmody's being here?"

"Wait a minute," Ray Hartigan said. He went out into the living room. When he came back his lean dark face was twisted in a snarl of triumph. "I knew you was lying, Flagg. The boys just checked with the doorman and the guy on the elevator. Mrs. Carmody went out at seven o'clock. She ain't been back."

"Maybe it was her ghost that hit me." Flagg grinned crookedly. "Why not try the telephone operator downstairs? She'll remember the call Judith was making."

"Hah!" Hartigan sneered. "She may remember the call, but how'll she know it wasn't the Sheila dame instead of Mrs. Carmody?"

Marx, the D.A., took up the phone, put a curt question or two, cradled it again. Turning, he looked at Flagg speculatively.

"Well, she bears out part of your story, anyway. A woman's voice asked for an outside line, not a number. The girl naturally can't swear it was Mrs. Carmody, but she does remember a man's calling right afterward and asking her to get the party again. Just then there was a terrific clatter as if the phone had been dropped, and the girl was so excited she didn't even try to get reconnected."

"All right," Hartigan snarled. "Either the Sheila gal hit him or he got that gash on his head in the struggle with Big John. What difference does it make? The gal did her old man in, or Flagg did, or both of them together did it."

"Mrs. Carmody could have used the service elevator, you know," Flagg said in his habitually sleepy voice. "It's in the kitchen. And there's a smear of blood beside the door, whatever that means."

CURSING, Hartigan rushed off again.

Marx said uncomfortably, "Understand, we're not accusing you, Flagg." Flagg amiably said that he understood, and he and Marx, and roly-poly Gus Keppler went into the living room. A deputy medical examiner was just pulling off his rubber gloves.

The deputy, sighting Marx, came over and demanded irritably. "Who is in charge of this case, anyway?"

"Lieutenant Hartigan. Why?"

"I just wondered. Nobody has even bothered to ask me what killed the deceased, or when, or where it happened. It's unique, in a way. I mean, I could just as well be home asleep."

Marx looked puzzled. "Well, the

answers are pretty obvious, aren't they?"

"Oh, quite. Yes, indeed. Only they're all wrong, you see. Big John Carmody was stabbed with a knife, and undoubtedly he was bludgeoned, but the thing that killed him happened to be a bullet."

"What!"

The little man gravely extended a tiny leaden pellet. "In his heart. The almost complete absence of blood led me to believe that the obvious wounds occurred after death. The knife was driven into the bullet hole in an attempt, I should say, to conceal the fact that there *was* a bullet hole. I do not know the reason for battering his head."

MARX looked astounded. Gus Keppler shook with sudden mirth, and yet it wasn't especially funny. "Hartigan will love this," he chuckled. "You tell the newshounds yet?"

The deputy said he hadn't. "Well, don't," Marx snapped at him. "Don't tell anybody except Hartigan, and not even him, unless he makes a point of it." He turned worried eyes on Flagg. "Any idea where we can find the girl?"

"None," Flagg said honestly. "I didn't even know she was in town till ten o'clock tonight. What about you, Gus? You were closer to Big John than anybody else. Do you know when she got in, or where she's stopping, or anything at all?"

"She had a key to this place, according to your tell," Keppler said. "Maybe she was staying here. John never even mentioned his daughter to me."

Flagg turned on the little doctor. "You intimated that the kill might have happened somewhere else? Is that right?" He was remembering that smear of blood out by the service elevator.

"It's quite possible. The attempt to conceal the actual cause of death is no more illogical than the simulation of a terrific struggle in this room. The knife that was used belongs to the desk set on the table there. That is the only reason we have to assume that that part of it occurred here."

The very brutality of the knifing and head-smashing, the overturning of heavy furniture had practically eliminated Sheila as the killer in Flagg's mind. Now, it didn't look so good again. From the caliber of the slug, it was undoubtedly fired from a small gun, the kind a woman would be apt to carry. So, to make it look like a man's work, she could have—

He'd almost forgotten Judith Carmody. Marx and Gus Keppler had drifted over to the desk, were talking in low tones. They split finally, and the district attorney put on his hat and went out toward the foyer and the elevator. Keppler, shrugging off the importunate reporters, came back and stared up into Flagg's face with an odd mixture of admiration and disgust.

"You think the gal did it, don't you?"

"Sure, don't you?"

Keppler grinned suddenly, round face creasing into a thousand wrinkles. "You're a liar, boy. You don't think so, but even if you did, you'd put your own neck in the noose to help her get clear. You're nuts about her, aren't you?"

"Sure," Nick said again.

"Damn it all," Keppler groaned. "I can read these so-called dead-pan gamblers, but I can't even tell if you're drunk or sober half the time. You're just too amiable to be human."

"That makes two of us," Flagg said. "You're pretty beatific yourself, Gus. So seeing you're so good-natured, what happens to Big John Carmody's dough? Who gets it? You? Judith?"

"Judith," Keppler said. "I ran across the will one day down at the office. On Judith's death, the residue, if any, goes to the daughter. Nominally I'm nothing but a business partner in the legitimate end of the racket."

"And the rest of it?"

Keppler's eyes were quite frank

as he said, "The rest of it was always off the record, Flagg. We paid in cash, collected in cash, and there was no holdover on the split."

"Leaving you in a nice spot, now, huh?"

"Meaning I'm head man? Of course. But don't go looking for a nice motive for me, boy, or I'll remind Hartigan that you used to be Big John's partner yourself. You two had a little trouble, didn't you?"

"Sure." Flagg grinned. "Fact is, I've been brooding over it for five years and never had time to come up and kill him till just now."

Lieutenant Ray Hartigan grabbed his arm. "I wish you wouldn't do that, Lieutenant," Flagg said sadly. "It scares me."

Hartigan wasn't running around in circles any more, though. He said to somebody behind him, "Is this the guy?" and whirled Flagg around to face a big bruiser who looked as if he'd spent the winter in a coal bin. He had the remnants of a Bel Air uniform on and you could see where his wrists and ankles had been wired together. Under the coal dust he was definitely Swedish.

He looked at Flagg out of angry, bloodshot eyes, looked at the dried blood on Flagg's forehead.

"Yah," he said determinedly. "Yah, dot's him."

"All right, that's all," Hartigan said. "You can go get cleaned up, but don't leave the building." The big man shuffled away and Hartigan got out his cuffs. "Well, Mister Flagg, I guess that'll hold you so that even the D.A. and Gus Keppler can't spring you."

"The complaining witness is the janitor, I presume?" Flagg said.

"You oughta know, shamus. You conked him and tossed him in the coal pile. And when we get that little tramp you been playing around with—"

"Leaving the lady out of it, Hartigan, just what do you think is the payoff? I wouldn't help anybody do a job just to get a few letters."

Hartigan's smile was almost pleasant. "I understand the frill gets all the dough her father left."

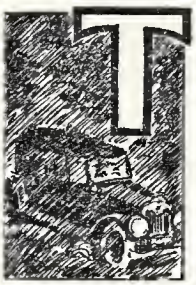
"Wrong again, copper. She doesn't get a dime as long as Judith is alive."

"Thanks, Mister Flagg. I'm glad to hear you admit all the angles, on account of we just picked Judith out of the coal pile, too. Offhand, I'd say Judith Carmody is no longer alive. She is, in fact, quite dead."

Flagg grinned pleasantly, as if this were very cheering news indeed, and brought up a fist from somewhere down around his knees and smacked Hartigan square on the button. As the big dick went down Flagg legged it for the hall. It chanced to be empty at the moment. The door to the fire chute was ajar and Flagg could have easily made it to the basement in nothing flat. Instead, he slammed the door, ran on down the hall and came back through the kitchen into Judith Carmody's room. He crawled under Judith's bed and lay there getting his breath.

CHAPTER III

Death Strikes Again



THERE was a lot of running around for an hour or so. Men tromped in and out the bedroom, but nobody thought of looking under the bed because nobody would think that even Nick Flagg was crazy enough to stick around after smacking Lieutenant Ray Hartigan.

And there Flagg was, lying under Judith Carmody's bed. Now, there was a screwy angle—Judith's death. Who the devil had she been phoning when Flagg interrupted her? It was stuffy under the bed, and Flagg, wriggling into a more comfortable position, got one of his hands tangled in the telephone cord.

He rolled over, saw that the cord had been pulled loose from the box. Now, when had that happened? He

wasn't very clear about what had happened after Judith had conked him with the clock, but he seemed to remember hanging onto the phone when he fell. This led him to something else, something so startling that he sat erect, or tried to, and almost brained himself on the bottom of the box spring.

Nursing the freshly opened cut on his forehead, he became conscious that the apartment was strangely quiet. The light in the bedroom still burned but there was no longer the tramp of worried feet, the sound of voices. Maybe the cops had called it a day. Flagg lifted an edge of the counterpane, dropped it again.

There was someone moving toward him from the kitchen, moving very lightly, but with a sort of stealthy purpose. Presently a pair of feet came and stood close to the bed. They belonged to a woman and, offhand, Judith being dead, Flagg couldn't think of another woman connected with the case except Sheila.

HE SLID over to the far side of the bed, rolled out and stood up suddenly. Sheila had a gun and instinctively she poked this at him before she recognized him. Then, quite calmly:

"Hello, Nick."

Flagg wiped his face on a coat sleeve. "Fancy this!" he said, exhaling. "I was just thinking about you, kitten."

"I know," she said bitterly. "You were thinking just like all the rest of them. All but the murderer. I'm almost beginning to like him, I think." Her fine mouth quivered suddenly. "At—at least he knows I didn't do it."

Flagg went around the bed and took the gun out of her unresisting hand. He put his other arm around her and let her cry quietly against his shoulder.

"Now look, kitten, I never said you killed John, did I? Trouble with you is, you jump to conclusions, just like he did once. And about the same guy, too. Meaning me." He found a clean handkerchief, gave it to her. "Now tell Uncle Nick what this is all about, will you? Why'd you come back?"

"Be-because everybody else was gone, silly. At least I thought they were. Somebody killed my Father, and apparently nobody gives a darn except me. All that you and the police and the killers are interested in is pinning it on a girl named Sheila Carmody. That way, everything will be whitewashed very neatly, don't you think?"

"Where'd you get this gun?"

Sheila stamped her foot. "There you go! I'm a gun moll or something, just because I've got a gun!"

"Well, I just asked," Flagg said mildly.

"Well, I don't mind telling you that I stumbled over it down in the basement. Somebody had scattered coal all over the floor and the gun was mixed up in it. Believe it or not."

"I believe it," Flagg said. "In the light of recent events I'm ready to believe anything you tell me, kitten. We're in a sweet spot unless we can turn up the real killer. The cops are looking for us both, now, and if we were shot on sight it would simplify things for everybody concerned—except you and me." He told her of the latest development in the case, Judith's death.

"Was—was Judith shot, too?"

"Lord, I don't know, kitten. Maybe she fell down the elevator shaft and broke her neck."

"Nick?"

"Yes, kitten?"

"Were you—were you in love with Judith?"

He looked at her blankly. "What's that got to do with it? I wasn't, but at the moment you and I should be more concerned about our necks than our hearts."

"Oh, Nick, you're such a fool! Don't you know the real reason I came back from Paris? Don't you know why I ran away tonight? It's be-because I've been mad about you ever since I wore rompers, and when you looked at me as if I were

a murderess or something—I—I just couldn't stand it!" She flung herself against his chest again.

He was standing there like that, not holding her, but sort of relaxed and vaguely uncomfortable, when a guy behind him said, "Just keep it that way, mug. It's a cute pose and I'd hate to spoil it." You could tell the guy had a gun. Flagg had one too, the little one he'd taken from Sheila, but it wasn't going to do him much good because Sheila was hanging onto his arms.

He felt her stiffen against him, then go limp, and just as the guy came up close enough so Flagg could feel hot breath on the back of his neck, Sheila took a back dive onto the bed. Freed, Flagg started to turn, and something hit him just back of the right ear. He went out like a snuffed candle.

When he opened his eyes, his first thought was that it was still raining, and that it was coming in on him, through an open car window. He was soaked to the skin, lying on the lurching floor of a big sedan, and something was weighting his chest.

He put up a hand, quite feebly, and identified the weight as somebody's shoe. Presently the ache in his head went away a little and he was able to trace the vague outline of the bulky shadow which began with the foot and ended with a dim blob of white miles above him.

He spoke to the blob of white. "How's about closing the window, my fraan? We're liable to catch our death o' cold."

There was a hoarse chuckle. "That ain't what you're gonna die of, buddy. I'd close the window, though, at that, if them damn coppers hadn't shot it out. I guess me and you'll just hafta suffer in silence."

"Shut up, Butch," another voice said. Flagg guessed this second guy must be driving the car. He couldn't see him.

"And nuts to you, Monk," the guy with the big feet said in an aggrieved tone.

The car took a fast turn, skidding dizzily off wet pavement into slushy mud, and Flagg, on the floor, began to bounce up and down as well as sideward. The car faded into inky blackness.

When this passed away, Flagg was in a room that looked as if it belonged in a hunting lodge, and the rain was only a far-off patter. He identified Butch immediately, by his feet. The other guy was smallish, very dapper when dry, probably.

"Why bring the mug way out here?" he grumbled. "We could have worked him over just as well back in civilization."

Butch, busy building a fire in a round, pot-bellied stove, said cheerfully, "From what I hear, this guy Flagg can take it. The boss figgered it'd take us a while to get what he wanted, and up here we wouldn't hafta hurry."

HE CAME over and stepped on Flagg's chest. "Now just lay quiet, buddy," he rumbled pleasantly. "Monk and me is gonna take good care of those poor wet feet in just a second, ain't we, Monk? You betcha. Monk and me ain't the ones to let a guy catch his death o' cold, are we, Monk?"

Flagg coughed, and something that was warm and faintly sticky ran out of his mouth. The dour Monk cursed. "Take that gunboat offa the guy, Butch! You'll have him dead before we can even start in on him." Butch took his foot off, looked down at Nick Flagg apologetically. "S'cuse it, buddy, I keep forgettin' how thin you are. Must've busted a coupla your ribs, huh?"

"At least two," Flagg said. "Now look, my friend Butch, maybe we can all get together without the necessity of warming my feet. If I only knew who the boss was, and what it is that he wants of me—"

Butch looked incredulous. "Hell, I thought you was hard!"

"Not me, Butchie." Flagg propped himself on an elbow, which was as far as he could go in one move. "Nope. Whoever told you that was kidding you. You're welcome to

whatever it is that I have and that you, or your boss, wants." This time he sat up. The pot-bellied stove was beginning to get up steam and the warmth felt good.

"Okay, punk, we'll try you on the first one," Monk said. "Where can we pick up the frail?"

So Sheila had got away! Strangely cheered, Flagg managed a crooked grin. "Well, it's going to be tough on me, boys. I can't answer that one."

"You mean you won't?"

"I mean I can't. I don't know where she is. Not that I'd tell you if I did, but I really don't. How come you guys didn't stop her?"

"We was at the wrong end of the damn fire-escape," Butch said. "She went down it like a bat outa hell. One minute I had her, the next I wasn't holding nothing but air."

"That's all you ever hold," Monk said. "Well, what are we waiting for? We gotta work on the punk, after all, so get his shoes and socks off."

Flagg lay there, let Butch get one shoe and sock almost off, before he put all he had left into one last kick. Butch turned a sickly yellow and went back against the red-hot stove with a moan that was almost human.

THEN, Monk, eyes mad with the lust to kill, dragged his rod and started pumping lead. Butch came to life and made a dive for Flagg, just in time to take the first two slugs in his back. Even two slugs couldn't stop him entirely, though.

He sprawled flat on top of Flagg, and thick, clawing fingers closed down on Flagg's throat, shutting off his wind. Gasping, Flagg managed to keep his senses even though he couldn't shake off the giant's clutch. Somehow he got one hand between his chest and Butch's hulk, got hold of the gun under Butch's arm.

He fired blindly upward, felt the fingers drag free of his throat, and looked up to see Monk pointing a gun at him, at very close range.

He didn't know why his head wasn't blown off when two shots came. It was very queer that a guy like Monk, who made a business of it, should muff a close-up shot like that.

And then he saw that it wasn't Monk who had fired. At least, the Monk had a screwy, surprised look on his face and was falling toward Flagg, a round hole in his forehead.

"Nick! Oh, Nicky, are you dead?" It was Sheila's voice, fuzzy around the edges, and very worried.

Flagg tried to say, "Sure," in his amiably flippant way, but nothing came out of his mouth but some more of that warm sticky stuff. Then suddenly the body of Butch was removed from his chest as if by magic, and he opened his eyes and saw a replica of Butch, only this one was wearing a cab driver's uniform and had a tire iron in one hand. He saw Sheila, too.

She dropped down beside him, lifted his head, crooning over and over, "Oh, Nick, I came as soon as I could!"

"Sure, keed, sure." Flagg muttered.

"Well, you won't need that tire iron for what ails Nick," Sheila was yelping at the cabby. "See if you can find some water and some whiskey."

He was a good finder, this guy. He came back almost at once with a quart bottle of rye and a tin cup and a basin of water. Flagg just lay there, letting them work on him as they willed. Between gulps of rye from the tin cup, and grunts while they bandaged his ribs, he learned what had happened after he was knocked out in the Carmody apartment.

"There were two of them," Sheila said. "I didn't know that when I took the dive. I thought you'd get a chance to use the gun, only Butch was too fast. By the time I'd righted myself, he'd dropped you and had grabbed me, and then the other monkey came in and helped. Well, I tried screaming, and the little one kept slapping me till I was practically out on my feet. Butch was

carrying you and holding one of my arms, and Monk was nudging me along the hall with his gun. Well, there was the fire door yawning invitingly."

"How many times does that make?"

"Two, I think. Only this time I went down head first and darned near broke my neck when I hit bottom. By the time I got outside, there was a gun battle going on. What looked like a police car was chasing a big sedan, and they must have had a blow-out or something, because the police car suddenly dived smack into a light pole." Sheila paused while she and the cabby lifted Flagg into a chair. The fire had died out. Big Butch and the Monk lay sprawled over the wreckage of the stove.

"So you found a cab?" Flagg asked.

"Well, I couldn't wait to resuscitate a couple of cops, could I? I had to chase that sedan, on account of I thought you were in it. You were, too, only we lost you after you left the highway and it took us quite a while to pick you up again."

Flagg managed to rise to his feet. He grinned at the big driver.

"If I ever squawk about a taxi bill again, I hope to choke, so help me! You're a grand guy, brother."

"Aw, gee, fella, it wasn't me." The driver blushed. "It was the little lady, here, that took the rod outa my mitt and put the slug on the wart. I was shakin' so I couldn't have hit a thing."

Flagg stared down at the two hoods, tried to get down on his knees and the effort made him go woozy again. Sheila saw his face whiten, grabbed his arm.

"Nick, we'll have to get you to a doctor!"

"No," he said. "Not until later, anyway. We've got to stop a certain party before he stops us, Sheila. He's been trying pretty hard and our luck can't last forever."

"Who is it, Nick?"

He thought about that for a moment. "Hamilton Marx, I think, kitten. Only thing is, I can't seem to fit him with a motive. Why should the D.A. kill the goose that was going to lay him the golden egg? In other words, finance the campaign to make him governor."

"Maybe Dad wasn't. Maybe he'd broken with Marx, refused for some reason or other to go on with it."

"And Judith?" Flagg mused aloud. "Would Judith be protecting Marx? Is that why she was killed, too? Because he was afraid she would break under pressure? Somehow, it doesn't smell right to me, and yet—well, added to what I know about Marx, it sort of fits, at that."

"What do you mean, Nick?"

"Back there in Judith's bedroom," he said, "the district attorney pretended to check Judith's phone call with the Bel Air operator downstairs. It was only a pretense, because I found out later that when she conked me with that damn clock, I pulled the phone wires out by the roots. Marx didn't know this because he was holding the circuit breaker down while talking.

"It was a stall, and the only reason I can think of for stalling, was to keep someone else from checking that call. Consequently he must have known whom Judith phoned, and the only way he could have known that—"

"I get it, Nick."

HE grinned at her. "Do you, kitten? Well, that's more than I do." He spoke to the taxi driver, who was shifting nervously from one foot to the other. "Look, my fraan, would you mind turning those mugs' pockets out for me?"

There was nothing to indicate who the men were, or for whom they'd been working. There was nothing in the rest of the house to label the owner. The big sedan outside had the usual registration strapped to the steering post, but Flagg was willing to bet the police were already notified of the car's theft.

They went on toward town through the rain. Leaving the sedan and Monk and Butch to keep the

lonely little lodge company. The radio under the cab's dash told of the frantic search for Nicholas Flagg and Sheila Carmody, wanted in connection with the murder of Big John Carmody.

CHAPTER IV

TRAPPED

AFTER a while Flagg said, "Those letters, Sheila. That was a dumb thing to do."

"Maybe," she said stubbornly. "You probably wouldn't understand it, but there's such a thing as pride."

"Pride?"

"I don't know if I can explain it, Nick. Somehow, I guess I never really had a chance to love either of my parents. All I had was a sort of half ashamed pride in Big John, because he was strong, and more or less a feeling of pity for my Mother, because she was weak. Somehow, I didn't want the whole darned world to know how weak she was. I never thought about the letters being construed as a motive."

Flagg nodded. "You're okay, kitten."

Presently Flagg leaned forward, and spoke to the back of the cabby's head.

"How are you on imitations, fella?"

The big guy half turned in his seat. "Me? Why, I'm swell at imitatin'! Gosh, I 'member once—"

"Fine," Flagg said. "You're almost perfect as is. Now look, you're pretending you're Butch, see? You call a number I'm going to give you and say, 'Boss? Dis is Butch. Yeah, the dame is at Flagg's place.' And in case he asks, I'm dead, see? And you're maybe having car trouble, so it'll take you a while to get into town. Now rehearse it, will you?"

The big guy coughed embarrassedly, but obediently went into his act. He had a little trouble steering, due to the fact that he was holding an imaginary phone.

"Louder," Flagg said critically. "Tougher." He was pretty well satisfied on the third try.

"You mean I'm to go to your flat?" Sheila said.

"That's the general idea, kitten. I don't know how else we can prove anything."

They were in town now. Flagg called a halt at an all-night drug store, went in and phoned the Bel Air. When he came out he had a grim, tight look about his mouth.

"The telephone operator isn't there," he said significantly. "She lives there, seldom goes out after work, but she went out tonight. I don't like it."

Sheila touched his arm. "Oh, Nick, not her too!"

"Looks like it, kitten." He stood there, one foot on the running board, rain beating down on his bare head. Presently he got back in the cab, and they angled across town to his modest apartment.

There was a stake-out in a prowl car a few doors down. Flagg told the driver to keep on going and come back on the next street over. He gave Sheila his keys, told her which flat was his, told her where to find his gun.

"You'll be okay, Sheila. If I didn't think so, I wouldn't let you do this. Just go up the back stairs and let yourself in quietly. Don't turn on the lights in front until you pull the drapes over the windows. Otherwise the cops'll come looking."

He watched her small figure dwindle to nothingness in the ink of the alley. Then he climbed in beside the driver and they went to another all-night drug store. Flagg got the district attorney's address out of the book, came out and gave it to the cabby with a phone number.

"Drive me out there, fella, then find a phone and go into your act. After that you'd better go home and forget you ever saw me." He emptied his pockets of money—there was something over fifty dollars—kept out a lone bill and laid the rest

on the meter. "There's more where that came from, my fraan." He put out a hand, shook the big guy's fist solemnly. "Not that I'm trying to pay you for helping the kitten and me."

"Forget it, forget it. It's a pleasure to meet a guy like you, Mr. Flagg." He took the money, though. "Sure you don't want me for nothin' else?"

"Just the imitation," Flagg said. "But fella, if you love the little lady, you'd better be good." They rolled out Sunset Boulevard. It was nearly one in the morning when Flagg got out and watched the cab's tail light vanish into the murky wet.

Flagg was depending a lot on this call. He knew Marx had faked the phone business in the Carmody apartment; he was hoping Marx would be surprised about the disconnected wires. Surprised enough to stick his neck out farther.

There was a light in a lower right-hand window of Marx's modest house, none anywhere else. Flagg started to mount the steps, thought better of it and went around to the side of the house first. Flagg parted the low hedge, crossed a little *patio* and looked in.

Hamilton Marx was alone—dead! There was a decanter on the broad desk. On the thick-piled rug, just under the lax hand, there was a glass. Hamilton Marx might have drunk himself into a stupor, except for the wide-open eyes.

Suddenly Flagg remembered the cabby, and Sheila, back there in his flat, and knew he'd have to move swiftly or it might be too late. He went in, not bothering to pick up the glass at Marx's side. It wasn't necessary. Only one thing could do the job that neatly—cyanide, or one of its derivatives.

Under a paper weight on the desk was a short, typed statement, signed "Hamilton Marx" in a firm, bold hand. It confessed in terse, unemotional fashion to the murder of Big John Carmody and to that of Judith Carmody. It even outlined the motives. There had been a quarrel over Big John's refusal to finance the coming campaign. Judith, being socially minded, had planned to divorce her husband and marry the governor, when he became the governor, only the murder had sort of complicated things for her, and Marx was afraid she'd break down and expose him. Rather ironically Marx gave remorse as the motive for his own death.

Flagg got Lieutenant Hartigan on the phone, holding the instrument tightly against his ear to muffle the dick's bellowing. After that he legged it out the window, down the street to the Boulevard and hailed a cab. There were spots in front of his eyes, and the awful, grating pain in his side was getting worse.

WHEN the cab finally stopped, Flagg crossed the walk and went up the stairs to his apartment. He didn't remember seeing the prowl car out in the street; it might mean Hartigan had been willing to play, or it might mean that the cops had just gone after a cup of coffee.

He took Butch's gun, which he had thoughtfully purloined, figuring Butch wouldn't need it any more, out of his coat pocket when he got to his door. Then, leaning against the jamb and taking a deep breath as if he were about to plunge into icy water, he twisted the knob. Sheila almost shot him dead.

It was all very confusing because Sheila, recognizing him, dropped her gun and ran forward with a little cry, and Gus Keppler appeared in the bedroom door. Keppler didn't drop the gun that he had. His round blue eyes got a little rounder when he saw Flagg, but his voice was still the chuckling, good-natured fat-man voice.

"I hardly expected you, Flagg. In fact, I thought you were dead."

"He is," Sheila said, whirling and spreading her arms wide in a protective gesture. "Darned near it, anyway, and you're not going to shoot him unless you shoot me first."

"Well," Keppler chuckled, "we

can arrange that, I guess." He waddled forward on his short, thick legs, kicked her gun under the couch. He couldn't see Flagg's gun. Sheila blocked that much of his view. Flagg stood there, propped against the door jamb, and wondered if he could get the thing up before Keppler went into action. It felt heavy as lead. It was almost like murdering Sheila to even try, anyway, on account of Keppler would probably plug her at the first wrong move.

HE straightened a little, sliding his thin shoulder blades up the edge of the wall, and began talking.

"The good authority was a frame, Gus. I had that phone call put through, myself. Monk and Butch squawked, you see."

"Did they, now!" Keppler marveled. "Well, even if you're telling the truth, which I doubt, any two-bit shyster could break their story down in court. You and the little lady will have gone on a long, long journey by that time, confessing the murders by your very absence."

"How about the D.A.'s confession? If you're not careful, Gus, you'll have too many of those things and somebody will smell an awful smell."

"So you found Marx, too!" Keppler's round face creased with mirth. "You certainly do get around, Flagg. Why, the confession I dictated for Marx was just sort of an ace in the hole. I can pick that up just as soon as I get rid of you two."

"Leaving Marx an unexplained suicide."

"Exactly." Keppler took a step forward, grabbed one of Sheila's wide-flung arms and whirled her around. Flagg shot him in the belly. The fat man folded in the middle, as if stooping for something on the floor, and the gun in his hand went off. It only fired once, though, before it followed the slug to the floor, and then Gus fell on top of the gun and lay there, wheezing.

Lieutenant Hartigan burst in from the hall, knocking Flagg down, and two other dicks barged in from the bedroom and grabbed Sheila.

"I had him covered, Chief," one of them yelped. "I had him covered all the time!"

Flagg struggled to a sitting position. "Since when?"

Hartigan looked disgusted. "I admit we ain't been here very long. I still figured you was ribbing me and we went out to Keppler's place first."

"Well, you must have found something out at Keppler's that made you think I was right," said Flagg.

"Sure," Hartigan grumbled. "We found where the rug had been turned around, and somebody had tried to wash out a blood stain. So—well, so we come up here." He bent down, rolled Gus Keppler over on his back. "So you done it, huh? You killed Big John and his wife and Marx and God knows who else. Now, why would you wanna do all that?"

Keppler's chuckle was all clotted up, but you could still identify it as a chuckle. "Wouldn't you like to know, copper?"

Flagg looked sideward at Sheila. "Mind if we talk about it, kitten?"

"Not if you hurry. I've got to get you to a hospital."

"All right, then," Flagg said, staring curiously but without a great deal of rancor at Gus Keppler's round face. "Gus was Big John's partner. Well, I used to be Big John's partner, too. Remembering that Judith once made a play for me, knowing the kind of a gal she was, I figured the same thing might have happened with Gus. Only Gus played it differently. He believed a whole loaf was better than a half, and gave Judith a real run for her money, thinking to somehow chisel John out of the picture.

"Only John, I think, found out. He didn't know which of his men were his, which would be loyal to Keppler. So when Sheila showed up he sent her to get me. I gather I was to do some undercover investigating for him." He looked at Sheila.

"He didn't say, Nick. I only got in yesterday. He seemed so wor-

ried, so anxious to get hold of you, as if he owed you an apology or something. He knew it was no good asking you himself, but when he found out how I—" She broke off, blushing a little. "Well, anyway, I found you."

"That's right, you sure did, kitten." Flagg grinned crookedly at the wheezing Keppler. "It took her a long time to find me, Gus, and in the meantime Big John decided to follow his wife when she went out. He went out the back way, I think. Anyway, he caught up with you and Judith at your place and either she or you let him have it. Then you thought it'd be a swell idea to take him back to his own place and frame it to look like a burglary or something. You'd still have all he left, through Judith, and you'd be head man in the racket. Only Sheila and I barged in at the wrong time. Judith began screaming to give you a chance to get away, which you did. Later, when she phoned you, she was a bit hysterical, so you told her to slide down the fire chute and meet you in the cellar where you would give her new instructions.

"Then, when I caught her at the phone, she went screwy. You heard her conk me, and you knew she'd crack wide open if it came to a real showdown. So when you met her in the cellar you did her in. Was it you that mixed with that Swede janitor?"

Keppler hunched up on one elbow. He was bleeding badly, but nobody made any move to help him.

"I guess I'm done for, Flagg," Keppler said, between a wheeze and a chuckle. "Sure I bopped the Swede, only I did it before we carried Big John in. He never knew what hit him. It was a scream the way he identified you for me."

Flagg winced at a sudden thought. "The girl, Gus! Quick, what happened to that telephone operator?"

"We got her," Hartigan said. "I forgot. She was out at Keppler's place."

Flagg sank back against the door jamb, sighed.

"Well, I guess that's all, then."

"Like hell it is!" Hartigan said. "Why kill Marx?"

"Because Marx held out on all of us, fella. He beat it out before anyone else, checked with the phone girl and found out whom Judith had called. Did he try to shake you down, Gus?"

"SOME," Keppler admitted. "He had the girl, and he'd doped it all out the same as you have. Big John and I had decided we wouldn't play with Marx any more, and Marx figured he had me over a barrel this time. He and I both signed confessions as a check against each other, and then we had a drink together, only mine was straight whiskey." That damnable chuckle again! "So then I just took my confession, and the girl, and went home. Butch's phone call is all that saved her."

"It wasn't Butch," Flagg said.

"No? Well, maybe I'm not dead yet, either." Everybody but Keppler had forgotten the gun still under him. It popped out suddenly, lifted to Flagg's chest. Sheila kicked at it, missed, and the slug took her heel off, slamming it against the far wall.

As she went down Flagg saw Hartigan deliberately pump three slugs into Keppler's round head. Nobody but Flagg saw the look on his face when he did it; it was as if he'd just done a good deed.

"By God, Flagg, I still owe you for that one on the button!" Hartigan snapped, even though he flushed when he caught Flagg's eye.

"But you're not paying it now!" Sheila said. She walked slightly cockeyed, having only one heel. "He's got to go to a hospital, you lug!"

"Well," Hartigan pretended to hesitate, "well, on account of the little lady, maybe—"

"Now, there's an old gag," Flagg said. "The one about she ain't no—You 'member?"

"It's true, too," Sheila said. "I'm going to be your wife."

"Maybe you will, at that," Flagg grinned. "When you grow up."

YEGG STAINS

Willie Klump, Gumshoe, Serves Up a Mess of Hirsute Hams with a Grease Paint Sauce!

By

JOE ARCHIBALD

Author of "Cat Nipped," "Bird Cagey," etc.

THE rough, dishonest characters of the big town took Willie Klump as lightly as they took everything else that was not their property. They believed that Willie was really as dumb as he looked; and therein lay their gravest mistake. No man could have been that way.

Willie Klump had a six-by-four room in an office building around midtown and it served him as headquarters for the Hawk-Eye Detective Agency as well as his boudoir. Willie looked as much like a man-tracker as the modern drug store looks like a place to get a prescription filled.

To a stranger, the president of the Hawk-Eye Detective Agency, when on a case, seemed more like a hayshaker who had come to New York to put an instalment down on the Brooklyn Bridge than a professional sleuth.

Things had been going badly for Willie. The last fee he had garnered had gone into a small stack of very prettily engraved certificates that announced to the world that William Klump was the owner of two hundred shares of capital stock in the Hold Tight Handcuff Company. The stock salesman had thereupon lost

Willie and Dunk erupted into action

no time in hopping a ferry to Madagascar. Consequently Willie was as devoid of legal tender as a whale is of feathers, as he sat in his office late one morning.

Willie had scrambled a pair of eggs with the aid of a small grill he kept in his filing cabinet and when the hen fruit was well cremated, he had opened the morning paper to search microscopically for crime news. But he could have thrown away his microscope, for the headline that screamed at him almost tipped him over backward in his chair.

JEWEL THIEF GETS
$50,000 IN GEMS
Police Believe Madame Hex Involved in Quaker City Emerald Robbery

The succeeding story told Willie that a very unscrupulous woman had entered the swank Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, jewelry store of Snow and Raynes and had asked for a look at some very expensive emeralds. But the doll, it seemed, had been very hard to please, and had made her exit from the trinket emporium without having purchased even a gold-filled earring. Soon after said damsel had taken the proverbial powder, the store clerk discovered that the emeralds he was about to put back in the vault were as phony as Mother Goose stories.

The titian-haired squab with the spotted veil over her pan no doubt had tripped with light fantastic toes to distant climes, said the paper, to hock the rocks. The gendarmes of the city of brotherly love were quite sure that the customer was none other than Madame Hex, in another of her disconcerting disguises, and they had broadcast the alarm.

Willie folded up the paper and tossed it to his desk. He drew a deep breath and then started industriously to think. For months now, the character known as Madame Hex had been stealing jewelry stores into delirium tremens. Compared to the elusive Eve, mused Willie, Jesse James was as small fry as a smelt; for since her first appearance Madame Hex had lifted a generous quarter of a million worth of sparkling rocks.

Willie Klump, as dumb as he seemed, knew that that was not hay. There was a twenty-five-hundred-buck check waiting to be signed in the offices of two insurance companies, and Willie shut his washed-out blue eyes and envisioned a check writer scribbling his moniker on both of them.

"Hm-m," Willie thought out loud. "First she grabs a diamond in Chicago. Then in Cleveland she swipes a lot of rubies and now she's decamped with some pretty green glass from Philadelphia. Maybe she ought to be in New York right now, as that is where minor league stars all want to go. Get into the big time. Funny how citizens forget that a cough drop taken when you first get a tickle in your tonsils will maybe stop pneumonia later on, and even save the family the price of a wooden overcoat with silver handles. I think I will talk that over with an insurance company."

WITH Willie, to think was to do. Accordingly, minutes later, wearing his best suit—a blue serge that was as much worse for wear as a restaurant clam—Willie walked into the offices of the Gibraltar Insurance Company and told the girl at the reception desk that he would like to speak to the president.

"I am a detective," Willie said to her, reaching into his pocket for a card.

The doll parked her chewing gum against her palate and took a swift inventory of the pasteboard.

"Huh," she said, "William Klump, President, Hawk-Eye Detective Agency. Crime Detectors. Ha, ha, I should think it would be the vice-president you would want."

"Huh?" queried Willie.

"Skip it," the blond riot sighed. "Take a seat over there. There's a flatfoot ahead of you, Mister Klump. Anybody'd think this was an opium joint or somep'n."

She picked up her dog-eared maga-

zine and chewed her gum while Willie parked his frame on a wooden bench and waited. In twenty minutes the door of an office opened and a very familiar figure stepped through it. Willie emitted a grunt. The man was tossing words back through the door, to wit:

"—yeah, an' you kin depend on us, Mr. Shortrib. The Department never stops workin'. The guy that stole that necklace is as good as in the can right now. Good aft'noon, sir."

"Why, if it ain't Satchelfoot Kelly!" Willie Klump snorted. "You should be arrested for kiddin' the public, Kelly. You could not find a place to sleep in a Pullman car."

"Whatta you think you're doin' here?" Satchelfoot exploded. "Don't git fresh!"

"I come to get insured against dogbite," Willie told him, with a grin. "I don't trust you, Satchelfoot. If you will step aside—"

"Don't let him in," Satchelfoot howled, waving his arms at the record-breaking gum chewer. "He ain't no more a detective than I—er—than—I mean, he ain't—"

"I ain't in Alaska an' I ain't deef," the doll screamed at him. "Stop yellin'!" She turned to Willie. "Dogbite insurance—ha, ha! You're a panic, Mr. Klunk. He reminds me of a great Dane, too."

"I'll git hunk!" Satchelfoot boomed as Willie stepped nimbly through the door to see Mr. Shortrib. "You just dast mess around with that necklace robbery, Willie, an' I'll tell the commissioner."

WILLIE ignored the threat. He nodded to the citizen who was scowling from behind a mahogany desk. Mr. Shortrib apparently was in no mood for a game of tiddledi-winks, and he admitted it.

"Hurry it up, Krump," he growled. "I'm getting sick of detectives. I bet there isn't one in this town who could find a beard in Russia. You're the worst-looking one I've seen yet."

"I don't doubt it," Willie Klump agreed. "That is why I am the man for you, Mr. Shortrib. Nobody believes I am a detective, so I get places where the other detectives can't. Now, I know you are a very busy person so I will not gallop around the thicket. I am here to offer you my services in the—er—campaign against Madame Hex—for a very modest fee to begin with, Mr. Ribroast."

"Shortrib's the name, numbskull!" the apoplectic citizen yelled. "Shortrib, Mr. Skrump."

"Mr. Klump, if you please," Willie said mildly. "Pardon me."

"Listen, you dumb cluck," the president of the Gibraltar Insurance Company bayed, "Madame Hex has never stolen any jewelry that we insured. So whyinell do you come here and—who let you in, anyway?"

"I am always ahead of everybody else," Willie said. "Now, I have got a very good idea that Madame Hex will steal something in this town before long. So why not have a detective to go around watching before the stable is locked, so that when the horse is stolen the detective will be there—I mean, that there ain't no sense in lockin' a barn after the cow is stole, if you get what I mean. To make a long story short, Mr. Souprib, I will be in the jewelry stores watching out for the dame so that I can nab her before she steals anything."

"You got to get a crook with the goods, numbskull!" Mr. Shortrib hollered. "Before you get anything on them, that is. You can't just jump somebody who walks into a jewelry store, can you, Klunk? Get outa here or I will throw you through the window!" He pressed a button and the blond dish soon appeared.

"Listen, you," Mr. Shortrib bellowed at her, "let any more crackpots in here and you'll find yourself parking your gum under somebody else's desk. Get that?"

"How could I tell?" she bleated. "He told me he was a detective. Have I gotta bite all them flatfeet's badges to see if they're tin before I let 'em in? How'm I to know who

is what an' what is which, huh?"

"Get out!" Mr. Shortrib thundered to both Willie and the switchboard Susy. "An' stay out!"

"He is not very progressive," Willie observed to the doll when they were in the reception room. "He can't see as far as the tips of his shoes."

"Neither could you," the wrong number dame cracked, "if you had his bay winder. Beat it, Funny Face!"

Willie Klump was out, but he was not down. There was no law saying that he could not go into a jewelry store and look around at the pretty doodads gathered under glass. He chose those establishments that catered to the upper crust of Gotham's pie, and visited three of them before another hour had passed. Toward four o'clock Willie walked into a Madison Avenue sparkling rock stall just as a customer was taking an avid gander at a cushioned box containing a very spiffy piece of merchandise that was dazzling to the eye.

Willie leaned indolently against a counter and watched the prospective customer, who was a very good-looking citizen. He had a patrician profile and a physique that had never been fashioned for the purpose of juggling beer barrels. To Willie Klump he appeared to be a very polite person, having removed his olive-tinted felt hat and placed it alongside a very spiffy malacca cane that had been parked on a divan. Reddish hair adorned his pate and he talked with an accent that was quite the thing.

Sitting next to the cane was a doll who, Willie decided, must be the customer's ball and chain. Looking at the gorgeous squab, Willie felt that he would not mind being welded to such a dish himself. She had hair as black as a Pittsburgh cellar at midnight, and her eyelashes were of the same hue and looked as long as the fringe on an Oriental rug. A very seductive perfume seized Willie's senses and his think-tank became quite roiled.

"Ah-h-h," breathed the customer, "she is ze pretty wan but she ees no' so good lak I want, *mon ami.* Here, Mazda, you look," he chirped, turning to his delectable dish of femininity. "You lak eet thees wan, *non?*"

Willie Klump could not take his eyes off the exotic doll. Just before she got up from the divan, he saw her drop a small compact. Willie heard her knees click together as she tried to prevent it from striking the floor. The eye-dazzling dame got up then and walked over to the counter, took a swift glimpse at the sparklers, then shook her head.

"*Non, non,* Gaston. Thees ees *tres* horreeble. No better zan zis you have, *non, m'sieu?*"

"Sorry, Madame," the salesman countered, "but we could have others for your inspection if you would come in tomorrow. Possibly we could send a representative to your hotel with some creations—"

"*Mais oui,*" the gorgeous one said, "zat will be bettair. *Oui,* Gaston?" Suddenly she got a flash of Willie and her retroussé proboscis became even more upturned. "*Sacre,*" she exclaimed, "eet ees ze strange customairs you have, *non?* I am tol' ze estableeshment of Biffany she ees ver' exclusive. Come, Gaston, ze smell in thees place she ees *tres* terreeble, *n'est-ce pas?*"

"*Mais oui, mon cherie,*" the male of the species agreed, retrieving his third leg and green felt skypiece from the divan.

SOMETHING was taking place inside Willie Klump's head. The obvious dig that the swell damsel tossed his way went over his cranium and drifted out into the traffic passing Biffany's. The president of the Hawk-Eye Detective Agency was trying to isolate a thought that kept playing hide and seek with his brain cells. The couple ankled out of the precious rock bazaar while he remained occupied with his thoughts. Suddenly a digit tapped Willie on the shoulder and a very uncompli-

mentary voice growled testily at him.

"What are you doing here, my man? You heard what those customers said to me. You have no doubt cost us a pretty penny by horning in here. Get out or I'll call a policeman."

"Huh?" muttered Willie. "Have a care, sir. I am the law."

"Wha-a-a-at?"

Willie Klump swung a lapel out of line and flashed a badge hurriedly.

"With Madame Hex robbing you taxpayers of the fillin's out of your teeth," he said loftily, "we detectives have to do somethin'. We expect her in town any minute now. Good day to you, my man. I will maybe be around tomorrow, too."

Drawing himself up with all the dignity he could muster, Willie Klump went out of Biffany's still trying to corral a stray thought that defied his mental lasso. He bumped into a mountainous character outside the jewelry store and started to apologize. Then he recognized Satchelfoot Kelly, and bit off his apology at the first knuckle.

"Listen," he snapped, "I'm goin' to get me a fine-tooth comb at the next drug store and comb you outa my hair, Satchelfoot. What does that make you?"

"Callin' me a flea, huh?" the Headquarters flatfoot yipped. "For two bits I would reach down your throat an' pull you inside out, you vacant house. What you doin' in Biffany's?"

"Gettin' some gold-filled aspirin tablets," Willie retorted. "You ask the dumbest things, Satchelfoot. I s'pose you're goin' in to promise Biffany that you will make an arrest for him, too. If all the crooks that you did not catch was laid end to end, they would reach from Hoboken to Yellerstone Park. Why don't you just give up?"

Satchelfoot Kelly picked up the nearest thing at hand to throw at Willie Klump. It happened to be a very indignant newsboy, so Satchelfoot had to put him back on the curb. When Willie looked back from his hasty departure, irate citizens were trying to mob Detective Kelly, and the newsboy was kicking lumps in the flatfoot's shins.

IT WAS the next afternoon that Willie Klump heard about the rubout at the nifty Hotel Chutney; and when Willie got to the swanky tavern that catered to the élite, he managed to get up to the place where an X marked the spot. He arrived in the guise of an ambulance driver's helper, having hurriedly barged into a Greek beanery on Second Avenue and borrowed a white coat.

The Hawk-Eye Detective Agency almost swallowed his tonsils when he saw the character who had been removed from the tax list. The defunct citizen wore the dark coat and striped trousers of an employee of Biffany's, and there was an empty jewel case on the floor near the remains. Quite an assortment of gendarmes and flatfeet were at the wake. Willie saw that the deceased had been erased by a caressing of the scalp with a lamp base. He took a seat in a corner of the suite and watched the limbs of the law diagnose the assassination.

"Yeah," bayed a big gumshoe man, "it don't make no sense, this note the guy wrote before he cashed in his chips. Unless—hey, fellers, I got it! Lissen—the guy wrote: 'Woman is m—' Get it? He meant Madame Hex, I bet! That's some clue. Spread the woid, boys. She had a confederate this time."

"How do you know it wasn't a Union man?" Willie tossed out. "Ha, ha!"

"Who let that in?" a voice bellowed and Satchelfoot Kelly pushed his way toward Willie Klump. "A sawbones apprentice, huh? Lissen, guys, you know this big cluck. He used to pound pavements an' he's a phony dick. He ain't got no right in here. Let's throw him out!"

Willie was thrown out. He picked himself up in the hall and rubbed a bump on his noggin with tender

fingers. His brain had been shaken up and an elusive thought had been knocked loose. Willie snatched at it and held it down.

"That's it!" he mumbled, getting up. "Yeah, I knew somethin' was screwy back there in Biffany's."

With a sly grin on his bucolic pan, Willie made his way to the Greek restaurant on Second Avenue and retrieved his blue serge coat. From there he went to a hardware store, made a purchase and hastened back to the Hotel Chutney just in time to see the late representative of Biffany's being carried out in a basket, on the way to the ice-box. Willie counted the gendarmes and flatfeet who filed out of the Chutney and, when the time was ripe, he walked into the hostelry, got into an elevator and went upstairs. He met a chambermaid and flashed his badge.

"Any cops in Suite Twenty-three?" he asked.

"There was," the scraggly-looking bedsheet mauler replied. "But the manager, he says it would make the jernt look bad wit' them hangin' around, so he asks 'em would they let him handle things, an' see that nobody got into the place unless he was a cop. Are you one?"

"Yeah," said Willie. "I got to get in there and check up."

"Awright, I got my pass key. You kin git in." She hauled a bunch of keys from out of her voluminous pocket by the aid of a long tape fishing line. "It's awful, ain't it?" the bovine-eyed bed tidier whispered in an awed voice. "They was such nice-lookin' people, too, Monsoor Eclair an' his wife."

"You can't tell what a story is like inside a book until you open up the covers, can you?" Willie grinned as one of the keys turned in the lock and the door of Suite Twenty-three opened.

"Yeah, that's right. Gee, you're smart, huh?"

"Don't tell nobody I'm here," Willie cautioned her, "as maybe some very rough characters are still in the hotel. Sh-h-h-h-h!"

When Willie was alone, he went into a bedroom and looked at the big trunk that stood in one corner. He had tagged it mentally an hour before—a green-painted affair with the initials of the foreign character Gaston on the end. Willie knew that the Headquarters dicks had opened that trunk and that he would find it empty when he got his chance at it. He did. But suddenly Willie shoved his nose inside and sniffed.

His lamps took an inventory of several stains on the lining of the trunk, and then he picked up something that made his Adam's apple run up and down like an elevator in a mine shaft. It was fragile and crumpled when Willie exerted the slightest pressure on it. Willie pocketed the find, feeling quite satisfied as he brought to light a package from another pocket and unwrapped it.

WILLIE worked for twenty minutes with a pliable metal bake-pan scraper and finally got down to bedrock. Large black letters began to show up as he gradually rubbed off the green paint that had recently been applied to the trunk. After fifteen minutes' more labor Willie wiped his sweated brow and looked at the words he had uncovered—PARISIAN FASHION PLA—

"Just the way I figgered," observed the super-sleuth, frowning importantly. "I've seen that character actor a dozen times before vaudeville took a nose dive. Looks like he got a partner since that time, though."

Willie swung the trunk around so that the side on which he had worked would face the wall. Then he left Suite 23 and likewise the Chutney as inconspicuously as his sartorial shortcomings would permit. At sight of Willie the doorman made a leap.

"You bums keep outa here!" he bawled.

"Yes, sir," said Willie, and he hurried down the street, his brain doing a rhumba.

Two hours later Willie Klump sat in his office reading the early edi-

tions of the afternoon rags. All of them screeched the news about Madame Hex having hit the big town and taken it to the tune of a necklace worth a hundred grand in any man's sugar. Madame Hex, they announced, had fooled the flatfeet by merging with another dishonest thief, and the alarm was spreading like a fire in a celluloid factory.

Airports, railroad stations, ferries, bus terminals and every other point of exit from Gotham were being watched as closely as a new excavation job. Get Madame Hex, howled the chagrined police, for the rubout of one Mr. Darius Frink, who sold sparkling stones for Biffany's. Darius had managed to tag his assassin before Charon dragged him into the boat which plies the route across the River Styx. So said the rags.

"Well, well," mused Willie Klump, as he read on, "Mr. Longbib would not listen to me, and here it says he was insurin' the rocks for plenty of legal tender. Willie, I can see sugar in this for you. I must call on him and talk over a very substantial fee."

Reading further, the president of the Hawk-Eye Detective Agency learned that the Hotel Chutney was holding the bag for a board and room bill left by the elusive "Eclairs," and it amounted to nine hundred frogskins.

"That ain't hay, neither," chuckled Willie, wriggling to a more comfortable position in his swivel-chair. "Maybe I can get a few dollars from there, too." He thought and thought and suddenly the still air was scattered by the snapping of his fingers and Willie was even startled himself. On his omnipresent scratch pad he wrote:

No. 1—The citizen named Eclair is really a character who was an actor named the Parisian Fashion Plate. With no vaudeville to work at, he turned to other means to get his oats. Became dishonest.

No. 2—Eclair got himself a partner. It was the character with the green hat. The Fashion Plate was the swell squab with the big googly eyes parked on Biffany's divan yesterday. The deceased brought the rocks from Biffany's to the Chutney and then got bopped and relieved of the expensive load.

No. 3—The defunct citizen unwittingly helped out the murderer by telling the world it was Madame Hex. The assassin will be laughin' right now and won't even bother to run, as all the cops are huntin' for Madame Hex.

No. 4—Actors won't ever give up the stage. That is where they will get tripped up. They won't ever keep workin' at anythin' else if they can eat in between shows. I bet all actors read the magazine called *Curtain Calls*. I will find out.

"That is very good, Willie," the president of the Hawk-Eye Detective Agency complimented himself. "I bet you're the only one that knows what you know."

ON AN empty stomach Willie Klump trekked to the lair of the Gibraltar Insurance Company. After much harangue, he finally crashed the gate tended by the gum-chewing switchboard player and barged in on Mr. Shortrib.

"Didn't I tell you?" Willie yowled before the insurance man could get his breath. "See what happened, Mr. Quickrub!"

"Shortrib is the name, Krunk," the citizen behind the mahogany blared. "All right, you told me, you crackpot. So what?"

"It is not too late," Willie said hastily. "I have practically got the rocks back for you. Inside of a week I can get the assassin of Mr. Frink if you can see your—er—way—er—clear to advance me two hundred or so. I spotted the dishonest characters only yesterday when I was browsing about Biffany's. I am so hot on their trail, my puppies are scorched already. And by the way, Mr. Shortjib, my name is Klump!"

"If I was not a desperate man right now," Mr. Shortrib whinnied, "I would throw you out, but I am in the mood to hire even an Eskimo. All right, Krunch, I'll advance you two hundred to take the case.

"Steak for dinner," Willie mumbled. "I will order half a cow!"

Willie Klump went out of the offices of the Gibraltar Insurance Company with an order on the U. S. Treasury for two Cs.

"It is the best investment you ever

made, Mr. Spotribs," he said with great dignity as he left. "I will have the rough persons in no time at all." Just then he bumped into an overgrown piece of the law crowding the doorway and bounced right back into the president's office.

"I'm gittin' sick of this!" roared Satchelfoot Kelly.

"You ain't no health resort to me, neither," Willie countered. "Why don't you buy an auto horn, Kelly, an' stop hittin' pedestrians?"

Satchelfoot was about to holler something in kind when his eyes lit on the paper in Willie's hand.

"What's that you got? A check? Willie Klump, did you extort that out of Mr.—"

"The stork come in the window while I was here an' brought it to me," Willie said sweetly. "Good afternoon, everybody."

Willie lost no time in cashing the check. Then he hied to a booking office on Broadway and went into serious confab with a hungry-looking footlight maestro, who moped in an office bemoaning the demise of the days when hoofers and warblers were at a premium. Twenty-five bucks tossed into his lap by Willie Klump almost gave the booking agent a stroke.

"That's for you if you do business like I tell you," Willie started off. "Now, listen. You are to put an ad in *Curtain Calls* sayin' how you need a couple of actors in a hurry who are able to impersonate people of both sexes very expertly. I will expect to be around here for a couple of weeks afterward as your assistant and will need a place to sit. How does it sound?"

"Cockeyed," the booking agent said promptly, "but for twen'y-five bucks I'd rub out the Mayor right now. You're on, Mr. Klump."

During the next several days the hunt for Madame Hex went on apace. The papers told the scandal-hungry readers that Madame Hex had been seen in fifty different places at once. Ten false arrests had been made and ten lawsuits faced the town fathers of the metropolis. Headquarters dicks managed to dig a laugh out of the mess when Satchelfoot Kelly gave them some dirt anent Willie Klump.

"Yeah, he's in the show business now," Kelly assured his laughing cronies. "He's got an office an' everythin'. I thought he'd git sick of bein' a detective—the screwball. I wonder if he paid back the two hundred he got from the Gibraltar, ha, ha. If havin' no brains was larceny, Willie would be in the big house for life."

Just two days after the latest copy of *Curtain Calls* hit the stands, the office of Mortimer Dunk, theatrical booking agent, began to look like the Grand Central Station in the rush hour. Actors of every size, shape and race percolated through Dunk's doors to show their wares. Willie Klump sat in his swivel-chair while Dunk weeded them out. Dunk would look at Klump and Willie would shake his noggin.

THREE days passed and Willie kept shaking his head. The right fish had not appeared in the stream of humanity yet. And all during this experiment the news remained on the front pages of the journals that the police were still closing in on Madame Hex.

"Listen, Klump," Dunk said after a week of reviewing prospects, "are you kiddin' me? Maybe a padded wagon's out lookin' for ya. I've earned my twen'y-five an' I'm gonna lock the door an' go away an' rest."

"Here's twenty-five more," Willie soothed him. "How's that?"

"You win, Klump! Let 'em come."

It was not more than two hours later that a couple came into the booking office and Willie Klump gave Mortimer Dunk the nod. Dunk shooed everybody out but the very comely-looking pair. Willie was puzzled. The male citizen did not have reddish hair. His hair was blond and parted in the middle. He wore a light gray fedora and a blue suit. Smoke from a very aromatic cheroot streamed out of his nostrils as he

told Dunk that he was the best impersonator in the business. He introduced himself and the platinum blond squab with him as a team known on the sock and buskin circuits of Europe as the Great Gambooges.

Willie eyed the doll and involuntarily scratched his scalp, realizing that it was not the dame he had spotted in Biffany's. The eyes of the dish in Biffany's had been darker and the hair had been black. The male character did not tie up with the citizen who had looked over the rock, not having any more accent than the squab with the platinum thatch.

"The wife here—she's let her hair grow," said Gambooge. "But if she should cut it off an' dress up in my suit, you wouldn't know she was a femme."

WILLIE straightened. Dunk was asking the Great Gambooge to don a wig and talk soprano. The president of the Hawk-Eye Detective Agency padded over to where the platinum riot was sitting, and leaned against her chair.

"Make it a black wig, Dunk," Willie said, "an' make him talk like a French dame. It ought to be funny, huh?"

The blonde squirmed uncomfortably in her chair. Gambooge looked as if his giblets had been seized by a cramp, but he managed to smile.

"Okay, Mr. Dunk," he said.

"I don't think we want the job," the platinum blonde trilled quite huskily. "Come on, Gregory. I don't think the dough will be any good."

She got up suddenly, then let out a violent squeak as her hair became widely separated from her head and remained dangling from Willie Klump's hand. Willie glimpsed short-cropped, reddish hair and yelled to Dunk.

"Grab the other Gambooge! I want 'em for murder an' robbery! They're criminals!"

Now the character with the sleek blond hair parted in the middle only impersonated females. He was no sissy, as Willie Klump soon discovered. The pass the fellow made at Dunk knocked the booking agent right into his own waste basket, head first. Meanwhile, the red-haired whatisit hurled a paste jar at Willie and missed. It went right out through a window that was not open and crowned a cop down on Broadway.

Willie went in at Gambooge as low as a Notre Dame tackle and almost put his noggin through the criminal's midsection. Willie felt the top of it bang against vertebrae just as the female leaped across the floor and climbed his frame. It seemed to him that his ears were in streamers by the time he got himself detached.

The red-haired siren impersonator was picking up a desk chair when the cop banged his way in. He was a very irate gendarme and was hatless. There was a lump on his dome as big as the cupola on the Capitol at Washington, D. C.

"Hold up your paws!" the cop bellowed. "I saw where that crockery came from. Put 'em up—all of ya!"

"You don't understand," Willie Klump said breathlessly. "These two characters are the ones that murdered Biffany's flunkey and I have got the goods on 'em. It's quite a yegg nog I have made here. This is a citizen who's known as the Parisian Fashion Plate—an' I can prove it. Take 'em over to the Forty-seventh Street Station. Take us all down. The citizen in the waste basket is Mr. Mortimer Dunk, who owns this booking agency."

Willie Klump went down to the branch jug and the news began to race through the Roaring Forties. Flatfeet made beelines to the place where the pair was locked up and when they arrived, they heard the citizen with the blond hair own up to rubbing out Darius Frink and to the theft of Biffany's sparklers.

"I don't believe it," groaned Satchelfoot Kelly. "It can't be true. He—"

"It is very simple." Willie Klump beamed at the gallery.

"I went up and looked in that empty trunk in Suite Twenty-three of the Hotel Chutney, where Frink was snuffed out. There was a smell of cookin' in it. I says to myself, that is because most actors cook in their rooms on the sly and have to hide the burners and things in their trunks so the landlady won't see 'em. There was stains in the trunk, too. Yegg stains, ha, ha! Get it, boys? I found a piece of egg-shell and then I was sure they was actors, even before I rubbed the paint off the trunk."

"Well, I'll be a monkey's uncle!" exclaimed another sleuth from Headquarters, mentally kissing a reward good-by.

"The clue that Frink left," Willie went on, "told me a lot. Right after you fellers threw me out of the hotel suite, I tumbled to somethin' that happened at Biffany's the day before the awful crime was committed. The doll, who was not really a doll at all, dropped a compact in her lap and instead of spreading her knees to make a lap of her skirt to catch it in, she knocked her knees together like a man would. So, I says to myself, she was a man.

"Then I says to myself again, actors have got the stage in their blood and would grab a job if somebody advertised that there was one goin' around. I figgered those two canaries we have in the cell there would decide the stage was a nice place to be while the cops was lookin' for Madame Hex.

"An' they couldn't resist doin' their stuff any more than a Dutchman could resist wooden shoes," Willie declared. "They could afford to take any kind of dough, as they had plenty of sugar on hand. Kind of smart of 'em, huh, but they ought to know crime don't pay and we detectives never sleep. Well, after they lammed out of the Chutney they switched around. The doll went back to bein' a doll and the male character took off his make-up and sang bass again. It was droppin' that compact that caught up with 'em, ha, ha!" Willie tossed a stick of gum into a cop's lap and the gendarme automatically banged his knees together to catch it.

"See?" queried Willie, beaming. "A he-citizen does it every time. Do you see what I mean, Satchelfoot? Well, Madame Hex better hide, as I am after her next. Yeah, I says two characters who could put on make-up like them two had to be real actors. I worked on that angle."

He grinned. "Well, if you camera fellers is through takin' pictures of me, I must go over to see Mr. Short-rib. I have to collect the balance of my fee and whatever reward is coming. When are you going to stop helping crime to pay, Satchelfoot?"

"Aw, I'm goin' out an' git drunker than a owl," Satchelfoot moaned. "Maybe I'll even take strychnine."

"Good," said Willie. "I'll call up the undertaker and order your kimoner for you, ha, ha!"

SATCHELFOOT fled the precinct station and collided with a gendarme on the way in from the outer office. When the cop had got his breath back, he turned to Willie.

"Listen, Klump, there's a dame outside an' is she burnin' up! She says you had a date with her ten days ago an' never showed up. She's been waitin' to brain you, ever since. Her name's—"

"Don't tell me," Willie groaned suddenly, "I know. It's Gertie Mudgett. Listen, Mike, I got a citizen's right to be protected. Ah—er—I would like to have a cell for the night, if you don't mind."

Willie Klump sighed with relief when the steel door clanged shut behind him.

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Next Issue: POISON AND IVY, *Another Uproarious Willie Klump Story by* JOE ARCHIBALD

Time Exposure

Murder Flashes Across the Screen as Keene Smith, Ace Customs Inspector, Unreels a Feature-Length Episode in a Drama of Diamonds!

BY MILTON LOWE

Author of "Death Rides the Silver Streak," "Cruising for Smugglers," etc.

CHAPTER I

Death on the Seas

MORNING hadn't roused itself from the lethargy of night. Streaks of crimson, dashes of violet flickered on the eastern horizon. *El Sol* peeped over, cautiously at first; then, not giving a darn, shot its bolt zenithward.

At the tail of the racing amphibian plane, some two thousand feet above the implacable emerald of the Atlantic, Martha's Vineyard diminished into something insignificant. Further north the elbow of Cape Cod flexed its muscles with each bob of the giant Sikorsky.

Inspector Smith

In the co-pilot's berth, dreaming of a day when ships, baggage, officials, planes, smugglers, dignitaries and lots of other important things would grow unimportant to him, dozed one of the Government's ace investigators. All at once, he had a nightmare.

What would become of him without that conglomeration of important things, and the trouble they bring?

Keene Smith, awake, wouldn't have cared a hoot. Asleep, it annoyed him. There you have it. His subconscious mind telling him exactly how a Customs inspector would have felt without the Customs and the inspecting. That was his job in the Customs Division of the Treasury Department.

A nudge of the pilot's arm against his ribs brought him back to realities.

"That parcel of blackness to leeward," said the pilot, "has smoke streaming from amidship. A boat, I'd say, guessing roughly."

A COMPLETE SMUGGLING NOVELET

The T-man gripped his gun beside the murdered radio man

Keene Smith blinked the sleep from his blue eyes, fastened them on the green carpet of sea, then grunted.

"Hell, is that all you had to say?" He shut his eyes. "Call me for breakfast."

The pilot, accustomed to the idiosyncrasies of Inspector Keene Smith, smirked. He switched on his transmitter and spoke into it in a cool voice.

"*Queen Ila—Queen Ila*—stand by to pick up Inspector Smith of the United States Customs." Under his breath he added, "And God help you!"

THE big amphibian dipped her prow, described an oval around the plowing steamer below. Whitecaps came into view, dancing in anticipation of the visit. Looking down, Keene Smith saw a huge wave break across the steamer's foredeck, tossing spray to the winds. Then the liner steadied on the lashing seas. Backwash dribbled off slowly.

"Your meat," snapped the pilot to Smith.

"What! For breakfast?" grinned Smith.

"Nope. For mental indigestion, pal."

The Sikorsky's motors were cut off, propellers idling in the gleam of the rising sun. Then the amphibian slanted to leeward, there to get the protection of the ship's plates against tricky currents and howling wind. The prow of the plane kicked up a spume of spray, splattered it against the windshield. Behind her a backwash fanned out into a choppy V.

A minute later two figures perched themselves at the ship's rail. From the hand of one swarthy sailor snaked a coil of rope. It sailed straight for the amphibian's cowled deck. Smith lowered his window, grabbed the hawser, fastened it to the base of the strut.

At a signal the two seamen on deck hauled. The plane hove to. Smith climbed out of the cockpit, waved a palm in farewell to the pilot, then reached for the Jacob's ladder over the steamer's side. The two seamen hoisted him over the rail while the amphibian's pilot was casting loose.

An officer, distinguished in gold braid, saluted the Customs inspector on deck, then extended his hand in greeting.

"Captain Moriarity at your service, sir."

Keene Smith brightened, accepted the firm hand, pressed hard. They were old friends, having played tag on the grumbling expanse of the Atlantic on other occasions. Before they left the rail the amphibian soared gracefully into the headwind, striking for the Jersey coast.

"Nice amphib," commented the ship's master. Smith nodded in agreement.

Not wanting to be presumptuous, Moriarity refused to broach the cause of Smith's call. They started away from the rail as the sun blazed forth over the horizon.

In silence Smith followed the captain to his quarters abaft the 'midship funnel. Hardly anyone had been aware of the amphibian's arrival. But those who had were frosty-eyed with contemplation.

The captain's quarters were well appointed, radiating the snugness found in cozy retreats. Somehow Moriarity had captured the warmth of a home ashore. Keene Smith settled in a comfortable armchair, while Moriarity poured a morning tonic. He waited for the inspector to speak.

"Sure that 'Silks' Loman is aboard?" Smith asked.

The captain handed him the drink, nodded. "Positive."

Keene Smith drank, put the glass on the rack at his elbow.

"He's not the kind of man to show himself. How'd you spot him?"

Moriarity smiled. "I didn't. Frank Teale was the one."

Smith whistled. Frank Teale was world-famous, but Smith always felt that the man was a faker. Nevertheless, Teale's explorations in the heart of Africa's Congo, the wilds of Borneo, the jungles of India were shown on screens of every motion picture house of any consequence. Teale was returning to America after a lecture tour in Europe. Smith knew all this without asking.

"How'd he make the discovery?" he inquired casually, without looking up.

Moriarity pulled a wicker chair close, leaned forward, hands clasped between his knees.

"Teale was shooting some swell storm scenes as a leader for his next film. There were some shots astern that he didn't care to miss. Two days ago he thought he was sure he had recognized Silks. But it wasn't until last night at the showing of his jungle picture that he was positive."

Smith nodded. "Teale told you about it at once?"

The ship's master shook his head. "No, he didn't. Teale had a late supper with me yesterday. Naturally, the conversation ran to the risks he took in his work. Then he mentioned that his business wasn't half as dangerous as Silks Loman's. It was then that Teale told about seeing Loman aboard."

The inspector crossed his long legs. "Lucky late supper," he muttered reflectively. He shot a quizzical glance at Moriarity. "You had reasons for notifying me, of course."

It was stated, rather than asked. The captain moistened his lips as he began to reply.

"Only the hunch that Silks Loman doesn't take ocean voyages for his health. And coupled with that thought was the sensational diamond theft in Amsterdam two days before we sailed."

"Good thinking, Captain," said the inspector. "I wonder if you told Teale you intended to wire New York."

"No. I thought it better not to say anything."

"Very good."

Moriarity understood, smiling at the commendation. Keene Smith knew the type of man he was dealing with. Loman's reputation—or rather the lack of it—was known internationally, and as much feared. Every time his exploits appeared in public, he made the front page. That was because he appeared only to do a job, then scurried back into the darkness and mystery that surrounded him.

HE WAS considered the last word in criminal finesse. "Gentleman crook" is what newspapers dubbed him. But Keene Smith had other names for him. Loman's "gentlemanliness" was based on his habit of always being immaculately proper in full dress at the time of a robbery. But Smith had reasons to know Loman would as soon cut a man's throat as a piece of cake. But with more zest.

Now, since the half-million-dollar diamond robbery in Amsterdam, Loman's name had cropped up thus unofficially. A master at disguise, noted for his intrepid escapades, Loman flaunted the law. No one seemed able to pin a rap on him and keep it there until Justice could get in her licks.

Smith knew that only too well. Loman had made him look foolish twice. The inspector was grim. There wouldn't be a third time. A soft job lay before him, he mused. Yes, indeed—soft as paddling around in a lake of nitroglycerine!

Smith rose from his chair, stretched. He was taller than six

feet, moved slowly most of the time, but had a way of extending himself at the critical moment.

"What name is Loman using this time?" he asked easily.

"Stokes—Benjamin Stokes, posing as an English barrister," said Moriarity. He had a twinkle in his eye. Smith's old nonchalance seemed to promise something exciting in the offing. "You'll find him, I hope, on Deck B, cabin one-one-two."

Smith nodded. "And Discoverer Teale?"

"Same deck, cabin seventy."

The inspector left the captain's quarters without another word. He headed forward, getting peppered by the fine spray, whipped up by the gale that swept the decks. Footing was slippery on the boards. The steamer plowed ahead like an obstinate bull, getting a snout full of bilge, then bucking and forging on. Wind whistled. The sea roared sonorously.

Before venturing down to B Deck the inspector stopped off at the radio room. He dispatched a pair of messages, one to New York, the other to Amsterdam. He requested replies at once. An astonished radio man gazed after him as he went to the door.

"Keep that under your hat, Sparks," cautioned the inspector.

Down on B Deck early morning strollers braved the gale, thinking themselves great seamen. Smith let most of them drift forward before he started for Teale's cabin. He wanted Teale to give him a good idea of Loman's make-up—if any.

Somewhere aboard the liner bells chimed. Smith glanced at his wristwatch. It was eight o'clock. A little searching located the explorer's cabin, up forward. Smith knocked lightly on the door. There was no response. After a moment he repeated his knocking.

His jaws clicked together. He wondered whether Teale had left for breakfast, but decided to test the door. It yielded easily. Silence was heavy from within, ominously heavy.

Shoving the door wider Smith stepped into the cabin. It was dark save for the light coming into the cabin from the doorway. A figure lay on the bed, motionless. The inspector bounded forward, a cold tremor playing over his spine. His body grew rigid. Behind him the door shut with a bang.

CHAPTER II

Gentleman Crook

ANOTHER sound then caused him to whirl. He glimpsed the uplifted arm behind him. Desperately Smith tried to dodge the blow. It crashed with terrific force on the back of his skull, glancing off and spending itself on his shoulder. The effect numbed him, sent his head reeling from the blow. Nausea gripped his stomach, churning it.

His right ripped out as he saw the second blow falling. His fist buried itself into his assailant's midsection, bringing forth a gasp. Then the second wallop landed on Smith's head.

Blackness webbed around him. His legs lost their strength, buckling, throwing him to the carpeted floor. He sprawled. An unsteady blur eddied sickeningly around him.

With masterful control of himself the inspector lunged upward. He rocketed a stiff, short right to his assailant's bobbing head. The punch was blocked neatly. A rapid, crushing jolt to the T-man's jaw dumped him. The figure lurched at him.

The inspector somersaulted backward, regaining his feet. Carefully he feinted his right, brought up his left with the zip of a Dempsey. Com-

ing in fast his assailant took the clout on the side of the head. It stopped him short. In that flash the inspector saw the gun in his attacker's hand.

A wild swing for Smith's head missed by inches. The two men closed in. A hard left was propelled into the man with the gun. Smith paid for that punch. He left his own guard open. A fleeting instant of panting, of struggling for arm freedom, of heated fighting ended abruptly.

The gun arced a short distance, landing on the side of Smith's skull, above the ear. A deadening sensation crept over the inspector. His head jerked once to the side, then sagged forward on his chest. A scarlet trickle rolled down from the back of his head to the neckband of his shirt.

HE slumped forward. The gash at the back of the skull spilled a splash of crimson on the carpet, spreading into a thickening stain. Unconscious, he failed to hear the chuckle of satisfaction uttered by his assailant.

It was some time before the inspector emerged from unconsciousness. A battery of field guns would have been mild compared to the clatter and roar that filled his head. Befuddled, dizzy, he tried to clear his vision and rise. Strength had deserted him; yet he sat up, blinking, endeavoring to get a brain-hold on the crazy stream of ideas that besieged him.

He lifted a hand to his head. Pain vibrated at his touch. Everything was an unholy blur before him. The cabin rocked like a seesaw with the jitters. It required a full minute of intense concentration for him to pierce the blur and focus his eyes. The cabin slanted, bulged, flattened, finally assumed natural proportions.

Then he succeeded in aligning his thoughts into a comprehensible pattern. In a rush his predicament dawned upon him. He remembered the fight, being slugged. He looked across the room at the bed. The figure on it had not budged.

Getting to his feet the inspector lurched toward the bunk. Strength began to flow through his veins again. He stopped short, frozen by the sight before him. He gasped, horrified.

Beneath the folds of the quilt lay a young man whose throat had been slit. Life-blood had crimsoned the bedclothes with its gory stain and soaked through to the boards of the bunk. For a brief interval the revolting sight paralyzed the inspector.

Death was a common sight for him. But in all his experience Keene Smith had never before witnessed such butchery. Nothing short of insanity could have impelled one human being to inflict such atrocity upon another.

Then Smith forgot his own wounds. A surge of stamina gave him the power to edge to the bed, in order to examine the dead man's face. It wasn't Frank Teale's!

This revelation brought furrows to Smith's brow. His eyes lost their torpor of fogginess. In its stead came a glitter of hatred. His fingers curled angrily, tightening as they would have fastened on the throat of the killer. Then Smith remembered he must have caught the murderer immediately after the act, only to let him slip away.

Smith cursed himself for not having been prepared for the killer's attack. The inspector had expected to meet death where Silks Loman operated. But not so soon!

A weariness not occasioned by the loss of strength swept him. With a shrug of his shoulders, like ridding himself of some gloomy cloak, Smith shook off the feeling. He was confronted with a difficult task. No longer

was there only smuggling to watch for! Murder loomed diabolically.

But who was this dead man? How did he get to Frank Teale's quarters? Questions, questions, questions! They demanded answers. The inspector hated the suspense they generated.

He glanced around the room. His eyes fell upon a large trunk at the opposite wall. Going to it Smith kicked open the lid with the tip of his shoe. A complex, expensive motion picture camera nestled in velvet.

It was a Bell and Howell, one of the best makes. Teale used this camera for his jungle pictures. Tins and tins of motion picture film were set in convenient racks on the sides of the camera trunk. Taking some of them out, he noticed vivid warning pasters on the covers.

EXPOSED—OPEN ONLY IN COMPLETE DARKNESS

Below in multicolored letters was printed the word "Panchromatic."

Smith knew enough about photography to realize the most sensitive of commercial films was being used by Teale. The film was stowed away in regular tins to be opened at the film laboratory where it would be developed.

REPLACING the tins the inspector went through the other compartments in the trunk, looking at various long focal lenses for distant shots. Other film tins, some exposed, bore the same caution label. Those unexposed had the maker's caution sign on them. At the bottom of the trunk, carefully laid away, were two film magazines which would fit on top of the Bell and Howell camera.

Next Smith went to a sheaf of drawers set in the wall to the left of the bunk. Monograms on handkerchiefs, shirts and underwear proved the cabin was Teale's. But where was he?

Smith pushed the drawers into place, then started for the door. He contemplated a visit to Silks Loman—a visit, he was certain, that was entirely expected!

He skirted the foredeck, passed a few lolling passengers, eyed them for an instant, then moved swiftly around to leeward. He found the door with the number 112 on it.

Before entering the T-man palmed his .38 in the pocket of his jacket. About it rested a set of fingers that would work with amazing speed at the slightest provocation. Without bothering to announce himself Smith pushed open the door. He leaped inside as a man twisted in bed.

"Steady," the inspector snapped. "Take it easy, Silks. It's only me."

The man in bed turned slowly, took his hand from beneath the pillow—empty. He scrutinized the T-man, rubbed his eyes. Slipping from the bunk he reached for a bathrobe that lay over a chair. He donned it, a question mark of doubt masking his face. Then he recognized Smith.

"Well, well," Loman said easily. "My old pal, the inspector!"

"Make friends easy, don't you?" growled Smith. "Sit down in that chair, hands in plain view. My finger is itchy this A. M. and I don't expect to be paid until the fifteenth of the month. And that finger is looped around a piece of hair-triggered steel."

"I understand completely," came suavely from Loman. "How about a smoke? Or is it against fire regulations? Or has Congress—"

"Shut up!" The order burst out like a cannon shot. Loman's hawk face grew grave. Twin eyes of gray belched angry flames. The T-man ignored them. "Where've you been the last hour?"

"Asleep," Loman said slowly, looking at the clock near his head.

He was a stocky, well-propor-

tioned man about forty. His hands were long and slender, a prerequisite of his profession. Some might have considered him handsome, in a cold sort of way. That coldness Smith knew to be refrigerated by an ice-bag for a heart. The thin, tight lips were drawn back now, wolfishly.

"Any proof of it?" asked the T-man, hedging to get a good idea of the room. Any moment now Loman might get gay.

"My sandman—" Loman laughed, attemping joviality. "A fine guy when you get to know him."

"What's the idea of being a barrister this trip? A fancy name like Benjamin Stokes doesn't seem to fit you."

Loman frowned, then brightened at an idea. "I hate publicity, you know. And if the newshounds got an idea I was coming back to my deah, deah country—" He tossed his hands helplessly. "Why, I'd die from the notoriety!"

"Maybe you'll die anyway," the inspector snapped.

Loman jumped to his feet, eyes flashing menacingly. "Say, guy," he bit out, "what's the big idea?"

"How about the rocks from Amsterdam?" Smith retorted, rising also and stepping closer.

"I knew it. I knew it!" Loman cursed roundly for a few seconds. "I left the damned place because I knew I'd be put on the carpet. And you Customs dopes think I'd try a stunt like that. Grow up!"

"Spill it," ordered the T-man. "Where are the sparklers?"

The international crook, resplendent in silk pajamas, lifted his shoulders.

"I give up. Where?"

His mien irritated Smith. The inspector wondered whether Loman were actually playing a game, or if he was on the level. There was no reason why Loman couldn't return to America. As always, there was no rap that could be pinned on him. Yet—

"You knew that Frank Teale, the explorer, recognized you?"

"Sure. I said 'hello' to him on deck when he made some shots of the storm with his camera. What's that four-flusher been saying about me, anyway?" His eyes narrowed. "How come you're aboard this crate miles from shore?"

"I'm asking the questions, not you," rasped Smith. "You know he made pictures of you, I suppose. And you who hate publicity so much let it ride."

LOMAN swore under his breath. His tanned cheeks lost some of their color.

"He made shots of me! Why, that—"

"Save it," came from the inspector. "Get into your morning duds, minus the rosette in your lapel. You're spending the rest of the trip in the cozy hole known as the brig."

Loman tensed, drilling his eyes into the inspector's. Their stares locked in challenge.

"Why?" Loman asked slowly. "I haven't done anything. Besides, this steamship line won't like to pay for defamation of character."

Inspector Smith laughed inwardly. Defamation of character! It was a huge joke. Silks Loman asking for satisfaction in the courts of the land! Harshly the T-man ordered him to dress.

Loman reverted to type then. His voice, losing its glibness, dropped to an icy whisper.

"What's the big idea, Inspector?"

"On the suspicion of murder!"

Loman fell back a step. His eyes widened, lips turning at the corners. He grabbed his suit of clothes, flung them on the chair, then pulled off his pajamas, muttering to himself. A minute later he was drawing on his jacket. When he reached for the

gardenia in a glass of water on the small table, Smith barked at him.

"Nix, brother. No decorations for today."

Loman shrugged his wide shoulders. He was seemingly resigned to the situation, yet hadn't inquired about the mur. It annoyed the T-man. Usuall, criminal blurted the question as soon as he heard the accusation.

"I'd hate to be in your shoes," Loman said bitterly. "Putting me in the brig without giving me a chance."

"A chance to kill off a few more people?" Smith jerked his head toward the door. "Move!"

Loman obeyed without hesitation. He pulled open the door, Smith behind him a step, wary for a trick. But he didn't expect the stunt Loman pulled with speed and dexterity.

As soon as the crook had opened the door he leaped out—his cracksman's hand on the knob. The fast exit brought the metal door around with him, clanging shut in Smith's face. A key clicked in the lock immediately. The T-man tore at the handle, restraining the urge to fire. He didn't care to precipitate a panic aboard ship.

"So long, wise guy," floated in to him. "See you in the steerage—maybe!"

Smith fumed, angry at himself for having been duped so simply. Tugging on the door failed to budge it.

A prisoner himself! By now Loman had probably found refuge. An idea came to Smith's mind.

Had Loman a confederate on the vessel?

His self-castigation fled as he scanned the room. He remembered Loman's movement toward the pillow at his entrance. Going to it the T-man chucked it aside. A long, lean blade, perfectly clean, lay on the white sheet.

"Hm-m—" was all Smith remarked. But he was thinking hard.

Loman's ability with a knife was well known to the police. He rarely, if ever, toted a rod. Too many states demanded licenses for guns. A knife in the hands of an expert more than equalled a gun. Silent and effective it could be. Smith did not forget the horrible sight in Teale's cabin.

He searched the room, found a city map of Amsterdam. Wrinkles furrowed Smith's brow as he stuffed the map into his pocket. Of the diamonds there wasn't a sign.

Loman was too astute to be caught easily.

Going through the crook's clothes Smith sought a bloodstain to link Loman with the murder. Hastily then the T-man whirled, caught up the phone. Instantly a steward on call answered.

"Get to one-one-two fast and open the door," he ordered curtly.

The scalpel-sharp knife was carefully folded in a handkerchief and tucked in the inside pocket of his coat.

Authorities might find interesting clues with the assistance of a microscope.

FINALLY Smith heard a key being inserted in the door lock. Eagerly he barged out. He wanted to return to the explorer's cabin and learn the identity of the dead man on the bed.

The door to the cabin was latched when he tried it. But the following second it swung inward. Captain Moriarity faced him, a frown on his Gaelic countenance.

"Something dreadful!" exclaimed the ship's master. "Teale found his assistant murdered when he came back here!"

"Teale's assistant?" the inspector repeated sharply. "Well, I'll be damned!"

CHAPTER III

Diamonds and Death

SMITH looked past the burly captain. A tall, well-groomed man of thirty-five, boasting a Vandyke, was studying him. Moriarity introduced them, mentioning that Smith was working on the case for the Customs service.

The inspector stepped into the cabin as the ship's doctor covered the corpse with a blanket. Smith wasn't concerned about the dead—it was the living that demanded his attention now. Besides his own life, he felt Teale's personal security, too, was at stake. But he refrained from saying so. It was up to him to protect the explorer; though he had no particular regard for the arrogant adventurer.

"How come your assistant stayed in your berth last night, Teale?" he asked. His tone held a slight insinuation, not ignored by the explorer.

Reddening under the question the man returned the inspector's stare unflinchingly. Smith, in no mood for tact, had not cooled off from his mishap at Loman's hands. Teale replied finally with control, hands knotted at his side.

"Benton suggested he'd stay here himself—Captain Moriarity heard him." He faced the ship's master then.

"Yes," acknowledged the captain. "After Mr. Teale's show last night in the main ballroom—he showed his latest picture to the ship's guests—his assistant said he would put away the projector and other equipment, and if it was okay he'd remain in Teale's room for the night."

"You see," added the explorer in a superior tone, "it required about an hour's work.

Smith reddened. "And while you stayed for supper with the captain, Benton stayed here. Where'd you spend the night, Teale?"

"In Benton's cabin on C deck, number sixty-eight," was the instant rejoinder. His face drained of color at a thought. "It was probably meant for me—that death."

"Why? Who'd want you out of the way?" shot back Smith, interested.

Teale fumbled with his beard, chin lowered. It was evident the situation was more than merely embarrassing for him. Smith surmised what was passing through his mind. Teale didn't care to mention Loman's name. So the inspector mentioned it for him.

"You took some shots of Silks Loman a few days ago, didn't you?"

Teale flushed. "Er—yes. But I couldn't help it. He entered the range of the lens without knowing it. But why should that provoke—er—murder?"

Smith said nothing. He felt Loman would have gone to great lengths to keep his face off the screen. Publicity for his type of business was detrimental. The more people who knew him, would put that many more on guard against him. Instead of talking about it, the T-man asked casually whether or not Teale had spoken to Loman at the time of the picture shooting.

"Of course not," snapped Teale. "In fact, he ducked out of sight as soon as he saw the camera."

"You had no words with Loman about giving up that piece of film?"

"None whatever." Teale wagged his head solemnly. "If that's all he wanted he could have had it. Benton meant more to me than twenty feet of Loman in celluloid."

"Better let Captain Moriarity have the can of film until we dock," advised the inspector. "I'll have Loman in irons by then." He turned to the

captain. "Have your stewards on the lookout for Loman. Tell them to report at once if they see him around."

Moriarity assented. Teale went to his trunk, took out a film tin and handed it to the ship's master.

"There's a thousand feet of good shots in that roll, Captain," he said. "I wouldn't care to lose it."

"It'll be perfectly safe in my office vault," promised the captain.

A slightly malicious smile tugged at Smith's cheek muscles. "Better keep out of harm's way, Teale," he suggested. "Loman won't stop short of murder if you're in his way."

The explorer recoiled, frightened. "I'll be on the watch," he mumbled. "But I can't understand—I can't—"

The inspector left with Moriarity, walked silently to the companionway. There the T-man asked if any messages had come via radio for him.

"None as yet," said the captain. "What messages?"

SMITH winked. "I had a little hunch why Loman is aboard. I'll see Sparks, then I'll be down to see you. Something tells me there's going to be a surprised murderer around here in a little while."

He raced up to the radio room and entered quietly. Abruptly a choked cry of horror broke from his lips. His eyes narrowed to pinpoints as he viewed death for the second time that morning.

The radio man sat upright in his chair, hand on a dial. But his hand was stilled. Never again would it send out a message!

Smith advanced catlike, every fibre tingling in his being. A strand of wire was twisted about the radio man's throat, drawn tight. His face was bluish from strangulation. To the right of the extended hand lay the inspector's two messages. Smith had no idea whether they had been sent or not. He glanced at the man's hand. It was palm up. Smith looked at the two radiograms again.

The radio operator had punched the time on the backs of the messages with the clock stamper. It had registered twenty minutes of nine. Smith stared, guessed his radiograms had been transmitted after all. He spun the dial of the receiving set to the international beam.

Then — "*Queen Ila—Queen Ila,*" came from the dynamic speaker. "Amsterdam calling the *Queen Ila.*"

Inspector Smith switched on the sending apparatus. "Standing by, Amsterdam," he stated succinctly. "Standing by, Amsterdam — *Queen Ila* standing by."

"*Queen Ila*—two-ten Greenwich—Reply for Inspector Smith aboard." The metallic tones crackled over the drone of the amplifiers. "Police here check—"

Smack!

A bullet ripped through the receiving set, shattering the amplifying tubes, killing the message. The inspector whirled, hand flexed on his gun. Dropping to the floor behind the steel cabinet he waited for another shot. None came.

Chancing death, he peeked around the corner of the cabinet. A slight noise, like the scrape of a foot against metal, reached his strained ears. He looked up at the ventilator. His assailant was leaving the scene. It was his shot that had interrupted the message.

"Now I know I'm right," muttered the inspector to himself.

Picking up his two messages he hurried to the door. The next second he was in the passageway leading toward the companion. He guessed what the killer's next move would be.

Legs pumping faster he raced for the ladder. He started to descend. Another shot whistled through the narrow confines. It tore through his fedora, carrying it off his head. He

hadn't heard the gun's report, though. Like the one released from behind the ventilator, this last had been from a silenced gun.

Spinning on his heel, taking cover below the deck, the T-man scanned the side of the ship. As before, no one was within sight. The clatter of heels on the ladder at the other side of the ship was heard faintly. Inspector Smith started toward them. When he scrambled down the other side his quarry had disappeared.

"Didn't figure he'd go for me like that," the inspector grunted. "But he'll be headed for the skipper's quarters now, I'll bet."

Smith hastened along the deck. He slowed up when he approached the captain's cabin. Listening with his ear against the door, he couldn't hear a sound from within. Only the incessant roar of the waves as they punched the sides of the big steamer filled the air.

Gripping his gun the inspector pushed into the cabin. Moriarity was standing at the far side, his eyes round and fearful.

Smith advanced slowly. "Did you—" he began.

A voice, cold and sinister at his back, stopped the speech tumbling from the inspector's lips.

"Easy, wise guy!" it grated. "Drop your rod and join the good captain."

Smith let his gun fall to the floor. It was snatched up at once. He turned to find Silks Loman leering at him.

"So you wanted me for murder! Whose murder? Yours?" Loman gloated. He motioned the inspector to Moriarity's side, then sat on the edge of the captain's desk. His own hand held the butt of an automatic.

"My fingers are itchy, too," Loman said. "So's my palm! I put this rod in a lifeboat for just a time like this."

He turned to Moriarity. "Open the vault, Captain. You, T-man—mind your P's and Q's, as well as the other letters of the alphabet!"

Moriarity hesitated. At the insistence of the gun he went to his vault. Loman moved toward the sofa but his eyes never left either the captain or Smith.

"You won't get away—" stated the T-man.

"And how, he won't!" interrupted another voice.

The eyes of the three men went to the door. Teale, the explorer, was standing there, a silenced gun in his hand. Startled, Loman fired. Teale pressed his trigger at the same instant. The gun report reverberated through the cabin.

Teale's bullet punched a hole in the crook's neck, tearing away some of the flesh. Loman's shot went wild, leaving Teale master of the situation as Loman crumpled to the floor.

"You'll get the same!" the explorer snarled at Smith.

HE STARTED to pull the trigger again. Smith acted with the speed of light. Out came the scalpel-sharp knife he had taken from Loman's bunk. It zipped through the air as the gun spat a tongue of orange. The slug ripped through Smith's left shoulder, throwing him.

But the knife had found its mark, burying itself in Teale's right wrist. The gun fell out of his hand. For an instant there was an abrupt lull. It gave the T-man a chance to spring forward. His right hand snatched at the gun. Teale tripped him, grabbing the weapon himself, firing with his left hand.

Burning powder scorched Smith's face. Unmindful, the inspector tore away the gun from Teale's hand. Smith didn't know the second bullet had creased his temple. When a sickly feeling invaded him he understood something had happened. With his ebbing strength he slammed the gun-butt down on Teale's head.

Teale crumbled, as lassitude settled over the T-man. As if hypnotized the inspector watched Teale jerk spasmodically, then lie still.

A shroud of darkness pervaded Smith the following moment. He didn't hear the clatter of the automatic as it fell from his hand. Neither did he hear Moriarity yell for the ship's doctor—

CHAPTER IV

A Matter of Film

IT WAS much later when Keene Smith came to. He found the captain's cabin filled with men. It was only then that he was aware the *Queen Ila* had docked. He looked up at the serious face of Chief Bacon, of the Customs Division.

"You'll be all right, Keene," he heard the chief say.

Seconds ticked off. The T-man forced himself up from the cot.

"Take it easy, Inspector," cautioned the doctor. "You came within an inch of having your brains shot out."

Chief Bacon scowled. "What's the idea of starting these murders? I sent you out to stop any possibility of having those Amsterdam diamonds smuggled in. And you nearly get killed!"

Smith was too weak to play games.

"Where's Teale?" he asked matter-of-factly.

"Over there," Bacon snapped. "What's the idea of knocking him out? He shot Loman in self-defense. Moriarity admitted that to me."

"It seems as if he did. But he didn't! He killed Silks Loman because Loman was after the film container—filled with diamonds."

"*What?*" Bacon goggled.

"Sure," went on Smith. "It was a darned fine gag. Teale stole the Amsterdam diamonds when he had a chance. But he didn't know he had beaten Loman to the job until he got aboard the *Queen Ila*. Loman was out to get the diamonds from Teale, after Teale smuggled them into the country."

"How do you know all this?" Bacon demanded.

"I sent two messages from the ship's radio. The one to New York was to check up on Teale's financial circumstances. The other was to find out where he had been in Amsterdam. Teale saw me arrive in the amphibian, trailed me to the radio room, then went back and murdered Benton, his assistant, by slitting his throat. Loman style, as it were. You see, Benton found out about the diamonds when he was packing away the camera."

Bacon grunted.

"Where's the murder weapon?" he asked.

"Probably thrown overboard."

"You mean Teale wanted to frame Loman for the murder?"

"Sure. That's why he tipped the captain off to Loman's presence aboard the ship, knowing Moriarity would notify us," Smith went on. "After knocking me out in his own cabin, Teale then killed the radio operator. I wasn't certain of it until I saw the back of the messages. Teale overlooked one detail in his hurry to leave the radio room."

"What was that?"

"Teale wanted to make it seem as if Loman was responsible for everything." Smith smiled grimly. "But Teale didn't see the radio man stick his hand into the time machine while he was being strangled. The clock automatically registered the time on his palm. It was fifteen minutes to nine—while I was interviewing Loman."

Bacon still couldn't seem to follow

him. "Why didn't Loman try to get the diamonds as soon as he knew Teale had them?"

The inspector wet his lips. "Loman wanted Teale to run the risk of smuggling them in."

"But how'd you know the diamonds were in the film tin?" the chief persisted.

A stab of pain then caused Smith to wince. He grimaced, then went on.

"Teale gave himself away when he said there was a thousand feet of film in the tin. A roll of film is quite heavy. The container Teale gave the captain was far too light. I handled that container myself in Teale's stateroom." He looked at Moriarity. "Get it?"

A MINUTE later Inspector Smith was holding the film can.

"Teale knew the Customs wouldn't look into a film can that states specifically—" he read the label on the can—" 'Exposed—Open Only in Complete Darkness. Panchromatic.' "

He showed the label to Chief Bacon, then ripped off the adhesive tape which sealed the container.

"Having brought thousands of feet of film into this country without a hitch, Teale thought it would be the last place the Customs would look for diamonds."

The top of the tin came off. Inside, embedded in cotton, lay a chamois bag. Smith opened the bag, poured a heap of uncut diamonds into the palm of the chief's hand.

"Half a million dollars' worth," the inspector said, then glowered at Teale, who was flanked by Customs guards. "Enough to support at least a couple more of Teale's phony jungle expeditions. He was broke and took this chance of filling his pocketbook. Gambling took most of his money—so he gambled big on getting the diamonds into the States."

Chief Bacon's eyes were hard. "And thanks to you," the Customs official snapped, "he lost again. Are you ready to make the charge against him, Inspector?"

Keene Smith tightened his lips. "Yes." He pushed the manacled killer to the door. "Let's go, Teale. Uncle Sam's financing your last expedition—to the devil."

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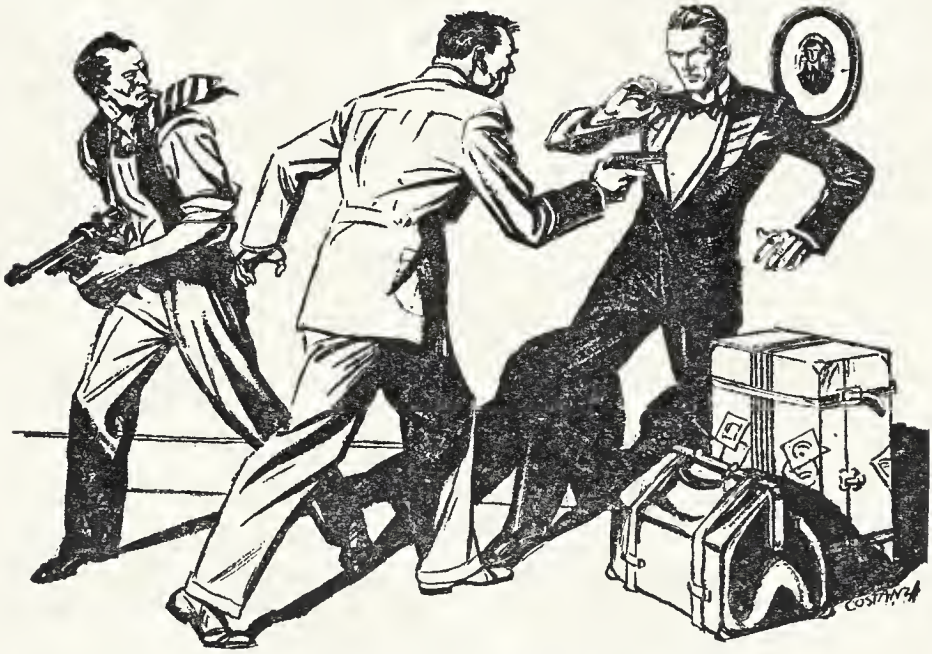

"Get over against the wall," Butch growled at Marsh

A COUPLE OF SLICKERS

By EDWARD WARREN

THE offer was toneless. "Hit me."

Carl Marsh, immaculate in his dress suit, glanced up under his eyeshade at the young man across the green felt table, and dealt him the second card from the top, a six-spot. The top one would have busted his hand.

Bob Travers was good for a grand or two, or he wouldn't be in the back room of the Devil's Grotto; but he had been losing steadily for a week and had a gaunt look in his eyes that Marsh didn't like. Sometimes they went out Beverly Boulevard a ways and blew out their brains.

Marsh flipped over the other's cards, exposed his own pair of nines,

and shoved out two twenty-five-dollar chips. He could afford it; the two huskies who had just left the blackjack table had dropped close to fifteen hundred.

"Listen, Travers," he said with deliberate intensity. It was early in the evening and they were alone at the table. "That puts you an even five hundred ahead tonight. It's the best I can do. You'll never get back the money you lost at the roulette table, and the thing for you to do is waltz out of here."

TRAVERS looked embarrassed. "You mean—"

"Yep. 'Never give a sucker an even break.' "

"Oh—well, thanks." He exchanged his two stacks of chips for three fancy red ones he could cash up front, hesitated uncertainly. "I—I never thought, when we were playing football together, that I'd see you dealing cards. Isn't there something I can do? My Father—"

"Skip it!" Marsh interrupted. "I'm doing swell. You'd do much better yourself if you'd stick to selling bonds."

Travers smiled uneasily and walked away. Marsh slid his visor back off his blond hair and watched the tall figure cross the inch-deep carpet and exit behind the two huskies. Then he glanced down at his cash drawer, practically in his lap, and fingered the bills. The fifth one down was a century note. Marsh's blue eyes scanned the serial number from long habit, and his heart skipped a beat and started pounding.

One of the ransom bills! Three months of waiting for this, and he let the bill get in the drawer without spotting the guy who passed it. What a hell of a Federal agent he'd turned out to be! Marsh's memory jerked back rapidly—the top fifty was from Travers, the hundred under that from the pale-faced bald husky, the next two fifties from Travers again, and the ransom century from the other husky with the broken nose. Marsh whistled softly to attract the attention of his relief dealer and motioned with his head.

"Hold it down for a while," he requested when the dealer sauntered over. "I'll be back in ten minutes."

Inwardly writhing with anxiety, he strode calmly past the formally attired guard at the door, through a dark narrow passage to an alcove and the cashier's office. Here he checked out—a rigid search every dealer and croupier underwent when leaving the isolated gambling room. Yet the ransom bill—excellent evidence—was not among the rest. Marsh's father had not been a professional sleight-of-hand entertainer for nothing!

A button was pressed to allow Marsh to open a steel door at the far end of the corridor, and a moment later he stood in the cocktail lounge. He ran his eye over the fifteen or twenty men and girls at the bar. The two huskies stood at the far end, near a small half-circle service opening between the lounge and the kitchen. Marsh sauntered over and thrust his head in.

"Hey, Swede, draw me a glass of water, will you?"

Turning his back to lean against the wall, he let the cool fluid run down his oddly constricted throat. His eyes stared with apparent interest at two attractively gowned young girls in a booth directly opposite, who were trying to pretend they were not discussing him. The guy who had passed the ransom century and his companion were a blur on one side, so close he could have reached out and shoved them. Broken Nose was talking in a hoarse whisper.

"—finish drinkin' that pink stuff. The boss says we pull stakes at ten sharp, and I got some packin' to do."

"Close your trap," the bald husky growled. "You talk too much with your mouth."

"Okay, but hurry up and finish that—"

Marsh did not wait to hear more. He put his glass down and went to the washroom, quickly opened a tiny, high window to tiptoe up and peer out, over the tops of parked cars to a dark two-story building a hundred and fifty yards distant on the other side of the boulevard.

Over there was a high-powered telescope focused on the washroom window of the Devil's Grotto, and an electric relay that dropped a weight on the rim of a gong. Marsh knew it sounded the instant he opened the window; but there was no response. His partner, Tim McAllister, had not yet arrived for his evening's vigil.

Marsh closed the window and glanced at his wrist-watch—five to eight. McAllister was due in five minutes, but that would be too late. Strange, after such a long, monotonous stretch of waiting, that every second should suddenly become as precious as gold and as important as life and death.

The two men had left the cocktail lounge and were threading a path through the dining room. It would take them two or three minutes to retrieve their hats from the checkroom and circle the building to the parking lot in back. Marsh had a quicker route; he ducked along a dark hallway to a seldom-used back door, fumbled with a pass-key, stepped directly into the cool moonless evening. He glided between a row of cars and stepped into his roadster near the driveway on the exit side of the lot. A deck of cards in his right coat pocket he transferred to the left, to make room for a .38 automatic which he took from a compartment behind the dash-board.

The two huskies were walking toward him now, and Marsh did not give much attention to another figure until the car door opened and Travers slid into the seat beside him.

"Lucky thing I saw you," Travers said, exactly reversing Marsh's thought. "I want to thank you for making me see the light. The excitement in gambling is like dope—if you let it get hold of you. I'm through. If it wasn't for you, though—"

"Please," Marsh broke in firmly, starting the motor, "pardon me for asking you to skip it, and step out. I'm leaving in a hurry—right behind that other car."

"OH, I see!" Travers said, as though he did. The two huskies drove past in a black sedan and paused with the front wheels in the street. "Let me go along. Two against one isn't—"

"Nope. It's against all the rules." Marsh let in the clutch as the sedan turned left out Beverly, and eased up to the place it had vacated. "You get out here, at the curb."

"Rules or not, Carl, I'm going. I need another kind of excitement to take my mind off gambling. I can handle a gun—if I had a gun. Here's your chance to turn, they're a block away already!"

Marsh swung left into the line of traffic and switched on his lights. Damn the guy, anyway; he was too quick on the uptake, and he was actually halfway grinning, as he used to do when he bucked a two-hundred-pound tackle out of the line. Marsh changed his mind.

"All right, you stay. But you scram out of the way when I tell you to. I may need you to send a message later, but that's all. No gunplay for you."

He spurted around several cars. Traffic was speeding up as they got

further from town. Travers leaned forward.

"This seems like old times. Which is their car—the fourth one ahead, isn't it?"

"Yep. Two tail-lights, both low. And they have a blue dashlight that throws a spot on the ceiling you can just barely see through the back window."

Marsh kept the sedan in sight; closing up while they wound three or four miles through a canyon, dropping back as the black car turned north on Ventura Boulevard. The city was left further and further behind. Here were truck gardens, walnut and orange groves, tracts of untilled land.

"These kidnapers," Marsh observed, "almost got themselves caught in Nevada through gambling, and they were traced to Los Angeles, or hereabouts. That's when we took hold of the job. I suppose there are others working different angles."

"Kidnapers, eh? I don't remember—"

"Happened seven, eight months ago. Kansas City."

"Good Lord! Do you mean the ones who sent the father's little finger to show that he was still alive?"

"Yep. And then strangled him to death an hour after they had the ransom dough. Tim—he's my partner—had a tip they were hiding out over north here some place, and he's been asking questions. That's why I missed contact with him tonight. Tim was to be back at eight o'clock, but they come earlier than we ever expected. Their last night, too; they're pulling out."

"The rats! I'm glad I'm along. Haven't you a gun I could use?"

"Sorry, no. What you can do is send word to Tim when I locate the gang's hideout. Might as well go in with a squad. Saves a lot of bullets on both sides—Oh, boy!"

The black sedan swung into a gravel road leading through an orange grove and apparently to a small house about a quarter-mile off the highway. Opposite the side road was a fruit stand, closed for the night, and a ramshackle little store building with a dim bulb lighting the grimy windows. Marsh drove straight on to the next turn in the highway, flipped a switch that changed his headlights from white to yellow, drove back to the gravel road and got out.

In the store across the street a hawk-nosed, pinch-faced woman in a soiled gingham dress squinted through the dirty glass and watched the queer antics of the man in the roadster. When the car's lights went out she grunted and nodded to herself gleefully.

"By golly, I do believe I'm gonna earn another ten dollars."

When the roadster wheeled into the gravel road and disappeared, she cackled aloud. Turning, she pressed a button under the counter, hard—

TRAVERS tried to see Marsh's face in the gloom. "What in the world were you doing back there?"

Marsh chuckled. "Leaving my calling card. Now, listen. I'm only going about halfway to the house. I want you to stay in the car and be ready to leave at an instant's notice. I'll take a look to make sure this is the gang's hideout, and be right back."

He turned the roadster around, cut off the motor, and switched on the dashlight. "There is the starter button, right next to the accelerator. If you hear anything unusual, scram out of here without waiting for me and phone this number." He scribbled hurriedly on the back of an envelope. "In any case, don't wait longer than ten minutes. Phone this number and tell the

party where we are, and to bring help on the jump."

"I understand, Carl."

Marsh switched off the light. "You may not get any answer—I don't know what Tim will do when he finds the relay tripped. In that case, phone the sheriff's office and give them the message. And stress the need for speed."

"Right. Speed is the watchword!"

Closing the door silently, Marsh slipped into the gloom and walked in the ankle-deep plowed earth between two rows of trees, his .38 nestled in his right hand. The moon was rising, but it gave little light and all Marsh could see was the tops of trees and patches of earth here and there. The orange trees were so bushy and the branches so low, he could not have seen far in any direction, even in the daytime. He had traversed what he guessed was about a third the distance to the house when he stopped, listening. A faint, indefinite scuffling sound had come from some distance behind. He looked back.

NOTHING moved; and the second was not repeated. He crossed to the gravel road and strained his eyes to make out the dark splotch of the roadster. Had someone moved, back there by the car? He could not be certain, but there was one way to find out.

Cautiously he retraced his steps, listening intently. With sudden intuition he turned over to the second lane, smack into another creeping figure. Moonlight glinted on steel as the man gasped in surprise and jerked up his arm.

Marsh's left hand darted forward, clutched the other's wrist and jerked back and sideward with all his weight behind it. The fellow came off balance, swinging his left fist. Marsh rolled aside and took the blow on the shoulder, twisting the other's wrist savagely. The man dropped the gun, but the entire weight of his body knocked Marsh backward, while his huge arm encircled Marsh's neck in a headlock.

They rolled in the dirt, neither one crying out. Only the sound of their gasping and the thuds of heavy fists on flesh broke the ominous stillness of the night. Then Marsh tore loose his right arm and crashed his automatic against the man's skull. That finished it.

Marsh turned the limp body over, to look closely at the face. It was a square face with a wide scar, livid from ear to chin, but one which Marsh did not recognize. He turned and ran toward his roadster to send Travers with the message.

But Travers was in no condition to take any kind of message. He was out cold. His head slumped over the steering wheel and a thin line of blood trickled down his cheek from a gash in his scalp. He was breathing slowly and jerkily, as though in deep distress.

Marsh noticed that the hood of the car was unfastened, and a quick inspection verified his suspicion; the wires had been slashed. He cursed silently, bitterly. Travers needed a doctor badly, and he himself had urgent need for speed. The best thing to do, he decided, was to carry Travers to the store on the highway, and telephone from there. He bent over to slide his arms under his friend's body. There was an odd slapping sound then, and the glass windshield wing shattered and fell in pieces on his back.

Instantly dropping beside the car, Marsh rolled over and got to his feet, running low. Ten yards from the roadster he knelt and fired a shot in the direction the sound had come from. Before the broken glass had touched his back, two thoughts had crossed his mind. The first was

that one of the gang, at least, had a silencer; and the second was that he had to direct the fire away from the car and Travers.

A flash of light stabbed the darkness and a bullet clipped the leaves over his head. Marsh fired at the spot, jumped to the next row of trees. The roar of a .45 straight ahead made him move again, realize that one of the mob was between him and the highway. Feet scampered on gravel in that direction, and a body brushed against leaves over on the left. He was cut off on three sides!

EERIE silence settled over the orange grove. Marsh turned and walked to the right. The moonlight was somewhat brighter, but it didn't help much. It was like walking over a tremendous checkerboard with a bush higher than your head on each of the white squares, so you could see only front and back, left and right, down one aisle at a time as you came to it. All the rest was dark and dangerous; you couldn't tell when you'd step right in front another of those coughing guns.

The silence was creepy. Marsh could hear only the crunching of his own feet in the plowed dirt, the occasional faint rustling of leaves. He went five or six rows to the left, and there was the road and the gangsters' black sedan, with the near front door open. The house was so close, it seemed to loom up, ready to pounce on him.

Nervous tension, he realized, and took a deep breath. Everything seemed brighter then, and he had an idea. What was to prevent his starting the sedan, picking up Travers, and making a break for it? Probably plenty, but he was willing to try.

Two steps took him to the running board, a third and he was sitting inside. The key was not in the ignition switch, which delayed him for three precious minutes while he picked the lock. He closed the door carefully. The heft of it and the three-quarter inch glass was the first inkling Marsh had that the car was armored. He smiled wryly. The armor was a convenience that worked only one way: good for the fellow inside the car.

The road sloped a little toward the highway. Marsh held his foot on the clutch to see if the sedan would roll; but the gravel offered too much resistance. Since he did not care to use the lights, he gave the road one last intent survey. There was a ninety-degree bend about fifty yards ahead. He stepped on the starter—and the motor roared.

Marsh raced to the turn, slithered around it, tore down the dimly lighted stretch of gravel. His roadster was so nearly the color of the trees in shadow, he didn't see the car until he was almost alongside. Slamming down on the brake pedal, he fought the heavy sedan to a grinding, skidding stop. He jumped out, opened the door of the roadster. It was empty!

"Hold it!" a voice commanded at his back. "Drop your gat—and reach!" A gun muzzle jammed his ribs hard.

"Hey, Nick, I got him! Down here, by his car."

Two more of the gang came out of the grove and approached on the run. One of them was Nick. Even with the dim light of the quarter moon at his back, his eyes glittered evilly and the thin line of his lips looked dangerously hard.

"Ain't you the smart one!" he leered. "You'll want to play 'drop the handkerchief' next, I reckon. Butch, turn the hack around. Slim, you drag that other mug out from under the tree and dump him in the

back seat." When his orders had been carried out Nick motioned at Marsh with his revolver. It was the one with the silencer.

"You sit in front, wise guy. Slim and I'll roost in back with your pal and keep an eye on your pretty blond mop. It ain't far—but I don't want you to miss our little party," he chuckled nastily.

Marsh slid into the front beside Butch, the broken-nosed gangster who had passed the ransom bill, and turned his head around. The one called Slim was the bald husky he had seen earlier in the evening. Marsh managed a grin.

"I wouldn't miss your party for anything, Toots."

"You're damn' right you won't! We'd have it out here now, only it might make a mess, and you raised too much noise already."

"That's too, too bad," Marsh said sweetly. "I thought you wanted to play."

SLIM reached forward and slapped Marsh's face with stinging fingers. "Close your trap," he snarled, "and turn around before I spoil your pug nose with my gun-butt."

During the short ride back to the house, Travers started to groan and mumble, regaining consciousness. Crossing the porch he staggered under his own power, shoved along by Slim and Butch. There were two more of Nick's gang inside the house. One of them switched the lights on at the leader's command, and Marsh glanced over at Travers. His face was the color of putty, his eyes were glazed and staring, and his lips mumbled deliriously. He needed a doctor, all right.

"Dump him on the day bed," Nick ordered, "and turn his face around the other way, so's I won't have to look at it. Where's Scarbo?"

"Wasn't he with you?" one of the younger hoodlums asked. Nick didn't say. Marsh took in the scantily furnished room and the suitcases lined up near the door.

"How about getting a doctor for my friend?" he asked.

"He ain't goin' to need no doctor," Nick sneered. "Nor you either. You didn't think—"

He broke off to answer a peculiar knock at the door. It was Scarbo, the one Marsh had left under an orange tree. There was fire in his eye as he spotted Marsh, and he took two strides toward him before Nick grabbed his arm.

"None of that, Scarbo. Not now; we got work to do first."

"Aw, Boss, he gave me an awful rap on the dome! I got a terrible headache from it. Just let me—"

He stopped short. Everybody in the room looked startled as a buzzer sounded loudly—one long ring and five short ones. No one moved for several seconds, then Nick whirled to stare out the front window. When he faced his henchmen his lips were compressed in a wicked snarl.

"You guys listen to me. This is probably some of the neighbors come to pay us a visit. If it is, I'll meet 'em on the porch and send 'em back to their knittin'. But we ain't goin' to take no chances. Johnnie and Trigger, cover the two north windows; Scarbo the south, and Slim, you take care of the back from the kitchen. I'll watch the front with the tommy gun and fire the first shot—if there is goin' to be any shootin'."

Butch edged forward, juggling his automatic. "What about me?"

"You don't do nothin' but watch our friend, the flatfoot. Crown him if he opens his mouth. If this ain't neighbors comin', you can finish him for good and douse the lights. Give him three or four slugs in the middle."

Scarbo rubbed his knuckles impatiently. "Aw, Nick, let me have him."

Butch showed his yellowish teeth in a grimace. "Not a chance, Scarbo —I seen him first! Say, Boss, you know who this mug is?"

"No, and I don't give a—"

"It's the blackjack dealer from the Grotto. What you think of that?"

"I think you and Slim were fools for going there. You brought him here. If you hadn't crabbed so much about being kept indoors, we — Silence, everybody! We ain't got all night to argue. Take your places and wait for the signal. Don't anybody shoot until you hear my shot first."

Nick leaned his tommy gun near the front window and peered through the curtains. Slim glided out of the room, and the two younger men took places near the side windows. Marsh was standing five feet from the light switch, near a door leading to the vestibule and the front porch. Butch shoved his gun in Marsh's stomach.

"Get over against the wall, mug," he growled. Marsh evidently did not move fast enough to suit him, for Butch crashed his fist in the Federal agent's face.

"Go on, open your trap. It'd be a pleasure to close it for you, after you gettin' me in Dutch with the boss."

Marsh did not reply. He was trying to figure how to get out of this jam. After Nick sent the visitors away, both Travers and he would be on the spot. Before the gang left town—as their packed bags showed they intended—they would without doubt put both of them permanently away. An automobile was drawing up in front now.

"That old woman must be crazy," Nick whispered hoarsely. "There's only two guys in the car, not five."

Butch shifted his eyes and opened his mouth to say something. In that fraction of a second Marsh decided that this was his chance.

HE THREW his body to the side, stretching his arm toward the light switch and kicking one foot at Butch's leg. His fingers dragged over the switch and the light went out; his foot hooked around Butch's ankle, and a tremendous roar deafened him as a bullet shattered plaster beside his ear.

Marsh yanked Butch's foot out from under the gangster. The heavy man fell on top of him and the butt of his automatic grazed the skin off Marsh's forehead. Marsh grabbed the gangster's wrist and they struggled desperately in the dark for the possession of the gun. For one lucky instant Butch's head was outlined against the light from a window. Marsh braced his left elbow on the floor and swung his right fist. Butch released the gun and sagged to the floor.

"Damn you, Butch!" Nick snarled. "I told you to wait. Now we got to catch those damn' farmers— Hey, Butch! You all right?"

Marsh tried to place the direction of the gang leader, but the window kept sliding around before his dazed vision. He attempted to satisfy Nick by imitating Butch's voice.

"Yeah," he growled. "Go on with the party."

"That ain't Butch—that's the copper!" Scarbo shouted.

Marsh snapped a shot at the sound —mostly for the moralizing effect— and rolled from the wall. The deadly clatter of Nick's submachine gun reverberated. Chunks tore out of the floor where Marsh had been. He shuddered—Butch was back there, now.

Nick screamed then. "My God! The cops! Dozens of 'em!"

He pushed the tommy gun out the window and sprayed lead. All hell

broke loose then. Men yelled outside; a different breed screeched from the inside. The air was a roaring maelstrom of sound and stabbing flame, and the acrid smell of burnt powder lingered like a death pall. Marsh shot at the flashes. Glass shattered. Lead splattered and ricocheted, whining. The chandelier crashed to the floor and the wires above spluttered for a second. Marsh fired at a dim shape across the room. The figure melted. There was a gurgling sound, and feet pounded the carpet in the reflex action of death.

A STAB of flame sent the Federal man backward then, and he was sitting on the floor again. He tried to raise his arm, couldn't. There was a mild explosion in the middle of the room—a second, a third. Marsh's eyes began to water. Something in the air was choking him. Nick was stumbling around, and he wasn't shooting any more—

Marsh breathed a lot of fresh air and felt more like something human. His stomach was sore, and piercing pains shot through his shoulder with every beat of his heart. He opened his eyes, glanced down. His shoulder was bandaged. He sat up and discovered he was on the front porch. A couple of fellows he remembered faintly were sitting on the running board of the black sedan, smoking cigarettes. He twisted his head around. Tim McAllister was beside him, grinning like an idiot. Marsh opened and closed his mouth experimentally. His jaw hurt. "Loan me a cigarette," he said. "I lost mine in the shuffle."

"Sure," McAllister drawled. "I'm thinkin' you're needin' one after that tear gas. How you feelin', Carl?"

"Better. How's my friend Travers? Did you get all the gang?"

"The doc says he's going to be all right. As for the gang, we got all of 'em you didn't get. We even found the bell wire runnin' down to the grocery store. Only we'll never be tryin' the old lady; about six rounds from the tommy gun found her first. Right down an alley between them orange bushes."

"That's tough. But it's people like that who foster crime— Say, Tim, I'm glad you figured things out the way I hoped you would."

"And what would you be thinkin' I am," McAllister replied indignantly, "a nincompoop? The tripped relay told me something was up. The paper boy outside the Grotto told me you drove out behind a big black sedan. So what would I be doin' but roundin' up a squad and comin' after my partner?"

"Well, I'll have to give you credit for coming the right direction," Marsh admitted.

"What do you think I been askin' questions in this direction all day for? I figured for sure you'd leave some kind of sign, and when I saw that deck of cards strewed over the highway, what would a smart Irishman be doin' but stoppin'?"

Marsh grinned. "Then you got my message, also?"

"Sure. I spotted those three cards propped up in the gravel right off. That code you figured out sure came in handy. The king of spades for 'the boss kidnaper,' and the ten of clubs for 'bring plenty help.' But I'm still wonderin' about the third card. I don't remember any heart signals. What would the deuce of hearts be meanin'?"

"Oh, yes. Two hearts," Marsh replied, straightening his tie. "That means you and I are going back to the Grotto. Before I came on this party I had my eye on two dames up there."

"Two dames?" McAllister tried to look bewildered. "We haven't even been introduced to 'em."

"Aw, nuts! We can show them some card tricks, can't we?"

Skewer of Death

While the Transcontinental Train Rocketed Through the Night, Doom Stalked Matt Dillon in a Dozen Terrifying Guises!

By WILLIAM WADDELL

Dillon's bullet found a mark in living flesh

MATT DILLON, Homicide Squad, Chicago, on special detail to California, lifted his eyes from the sight and took a deep breath. Then he wheeled abruptly and jerked open the door to his compartment. He was halfway through it when the significance of the conductor's announcement struck him, stopping him as effectively as a stone wall.

The conductor was addressing the few passengers in the car from the passage entry at the other end of the Pullman. He was a big fleshy man with a red face. But his eyes had an alertness and some other subtle quality that made Dillon glance sharply back at them again.

Somewhere in his middle thirties the detective judged him to be, a man whose life had been marked by strenuous activity. Maybe athletics, maybe hard muscular labor. But Dillon thought not. Those eyes suggested a different story.

"I'll have to trouble you all for identification," the conductor was saying. "A criminal is at large on this train."

Dillon studied the conductor thoughtfully for a moment, and the cautioning words of his chief in Chicago swiftly recurred to him.

"You can't relax when you're up against a man like Lorch," the chief had warned, a serious expression on his face confirming the gravity of his words. "He's no hopped-up cheap crook, but a man whose mental caliber is far above normal. Don't permit yourself a mental letdown at any time when you meet with him. I've lost two men already for making that mistake against men of Lorch's type."

"I'll watch it," Dillon had assured him. "Where are his photographs, his history, and descriptions."

FOR the first time in his career on the force, Dillon had seen a look of bafflement come over the chief's face.

"I can't give them to you," he had said, spreading his hands wearily. "That ought to give you a pretty good idea of what you're up against. Steve Lorch, the only name we know him by, seems to have a dozen different appearances. And we've never been able to pin down one of them. The only thing we know is that he's about six feet tall, well built and has some trouble with his eyes. He's far-sighted."

"Far-sighted?" said Dillon.

"Yes, we found that out from Quillan's records—the oculist he killed over on the North Side. It notes that he has a slight case of recurrent astigmatism, too. Why Quillan, an eye doctor, took his height and weight, I can't imagine. Maybe he suspected something queer about him. If that is so, then Lorch killed him when he attempted to get more information. We haven't been able to find another motive. But that record, and it's pretty incomplete, is all we have on the man—except one thing."

Dillon had shrugged his shoulders.

"You might as well give me that, too. It may not help, but it certainly can't hurt."

"Well, all right, but I don't think you'll have any occasion to use it. We knew that Lorch is not a habitual killer. He knows it's too dangerous and shies away from it. His line is confidence work, swindling and mail order rackets. But he has killed three times that we know of. And each time he's used the same weapon—something that looks like a hatpin. It makes a minute wound so small that it took several examinations to determine the cause of death in the said three murders."

The chief had shaken Dillon's hand in parting.

"A man who can keep his brain working overtime should get to Lorch," he had said. "I think you're that man, Dillon. Good luck!"

Dillon, thinking over those words and watching the conductor who had just made a startling statement, so entirely apart from railroad regulation, or from police regulation either, for that matter, turned suddenly and went back into his compartment, slamming the door behind him.

The body was quite the same. Crumpled down there in the corner between the compartment wall and the edge of the Pullman seat, it looked like some bizarre puppet flung there by a careless hand. The stain on the shirt front, low down near the belt line, looked no larger then it had a moment ago. Dillon remembered something about blood getting sluggish after death, no longer aided by the pulsating heart.

He lit a cigarette and stared thoughtfully down along it at the body. That bloodstain was not very large. Dillon knew why. Underneath it there was only a pinprick of a wound. But a pinprick that went down deep to the heart. A wound that might have been made by a hatpin! A wound made by Steve Lorch!

But why was the body planted in his compartment? Dillon searched the corners of his mind for that answer and found nothing. Yet he must find out.

And quickly the plan of action occurred to him.

He rubbed out his cigarette in an

ashtray and stepped reluctantly forward. He bent over the dead man.

The man was heavy, his arms still warm. One thing was certain. It had happened not more than half an hour ago.

He finally got the dead weight up off the floor and into the small cubicle that served for a washroom. One of the dead hands dangling downward suddenly caught his eye. He bent forward and pried it open with some difficulty, freeing the steel instrument that had flashed and caught his attention. A nailfile rested in his palm.

"I'd advise you," a soft, sneering voice said over his shoulder, "to give that to me."

Dillon whirled. As he did so he heard the click of a light switch and blackness filled the room.

The detective's hand shot out, grasped clothes that were torn from his grasp as their occupant twisted away. He groped again, but his hands found nothing.

Then a hand roughly grasped his wrist and twisted the fingers that held the nailfile. It wrested the metal instrument out of them before Dillon's muscles could react and clutch it tighter.

Dillon, gauging rapidly where the other man's head should be, aimed a swing into the darkness and felt the solid satisfactory compact of a fist connecting with flesh and bone. His other hand moving to his shoulder holster to get his gun, he followed up his advantage.

A body pressed against him and grasping fingers tore at his throat. Dillon felt whiskers rasping against his face. His gun was out now and he crashed it against the skull that was so close to his own. But the blow was glancing and the other man only staggered back to be lost in the blackness again, redoubling the menace of the struggle at close quarters for now Dillon was at a disadvantage.

Both men were panting now, and Dillon moved in the direction of the other's breathing. Should he take a shot? Not a chance that way. The other man would see the flash of his gun and let him have it. Besides, it would notify the other occupants of the car and bring the whole show out in the open. Dillon didn't want that. If he didn't know who Lorch was, neither did Lorch realize his identity. Besides, he had planned to use the apparent absence of that body to draw out Lorch, to puzzle him and make him show his hand in trying to find the whereabouts of the body. The absence of the body was to be the lure, his compartment the trap.

BUT Lorch had acted according to the chief's prediction — rapidly and cleverly. He had come at the unexpected moment to recover damaging evidence against himself.

And that proved another thing to Dillon. That the body had not been planted because of his occupancy of the compartment. He was convinced that Lorch did not know who he was. For a man of Lorch's mentality would never have left that evidence, that nailfile on the body if he had meant to plant it. Probably his fingerprints were on it.

Lorch had dumped the body into the nearest compartment in a desperate attempt to get rid of it after the kill before discovery by someone who may have been approaching. And the compartment had happened to be his.

There was only one thing puzzling Dillon as he moved toward the man he had combed the sordid bars, greasy restaurants and cheap night clubs in the back alleys of a dozen cities to find and who was now at last panting in the darkness an arm's length away from him.

Where was the conductor? Why had the man notified the passengers of the presence of a criminal on the train—a strict breach of the regulations of both police methods and railroad policy? There was no sense in warning the criminal and alarming the passengers.

Dillon tabled the solution of that one for a later date and set himself to the business at hand. Even if the conductor was a confederate of Lorch's, Lorch himself was here

now. If he took Lorch now, he could worry about the confederate idea at his leisure.

Then he brushed against cloth on his right side. He wheeled. Lorch was making for the door. His hand went out, caught a shoulder and pulled back sharply. A body stumbled back against him, and Dillon flashed his arm up again for that blow to the skull that would put an end to the battle.

But the man was nothing if not agile. He twisted like a trapped animal and slipped out of Dillon's grasp for the second time. The plainclothes man's gun flashed down on emptiness. And in the next instant Dillon felt a sharp, searing pain in his shoulder and a crashing blow on his head. Lorch had used his hatpin stab and added a blow to the head by way of variation.

BEFORE the blackness became complete, Dillon saw a faint flash of light and a figure slipping through the opening door. Then all was blotted out.

Ten minutes later he rolled over and stood up. He shook his aching head and, staggering to his feet, stumbled across to the light switch. He snapped it on. The room was the same as before, showing no evidences of the struggle.

Even the body was still there slumped in the narrow confines of the washroom cubicle. Then Dillon remembered the conductor who was probably still going through the car for identifying purposes. Lorch, most likely, had had no opportunity to remove the corpse.

He flexed his arm experimentally. There was pain high up in the shoulder, but no loss of function. He took off his coat and shirt and examined the wound. Hardly any blood had escaped from the small puncture, the same as he had found on the dead man in the washroom.

The wound had somehow avoided all the important arteries and muscles. He put on his coat and shirt, musing on the picture of what might have happened if the wound had been a few inches lower.

He looked at his head in the mirror. No blood there either, only a bump. The ache was already lessening. Apparently he had been covered with luck.

There was a knock on the door. That would be the conductor on his tour of investigation. Good! He wanted a look at this conductor guy, anyhow. He moved swiftly to the washroom door and closed it with one hand while with the other he turned the knob of the compartment door. The conductor entered as Dillon stepped back.

"Sorry about this, sir," he murmured, his eyes glancing down at papers held in his hand. "It's just routine. There's a criminal somewhere on the train, and I'll have to inspect all identifications. Let's see. We have this compartment under the name of Willard Russell. That correct?"

Dillon assented. It was one of a number of aliases he assumed when on a case.

The man looked up at him. Again Dillon was aware of his eyes. Deep blue, piercing and with that strange quality under their surface, they were queerly misplaced in the face of a conductor.

"Identification, please?"

Dillon was getting an inspiration. The words of the chief were again running through his head. Astigmatism and far sightedness. He pulled a paper from his pocket—a letter of credit he always carried. He smiled. He had just noticed the conductor had two days' stubble on his face.

"Sorry," he said. "But I can't let this out of my possession. It's rather important to a few other people besides myself. I'll have to hold it for you to read."

He held the paper so that it was two feet away from the conductor's eyes.

The man frowned at it and shook his head.

"Sorry, sir," he said. "I can't read it that far away."

Dillon relaxed. He held the paper closer.

"I guess that's okay, sir. Sorry

to bother you," nodded the conductor.

As he turned to go, Dillon put a cigarette to his mouth.

"Oh, what did you say this—er—criminal's name was?" he asked casually.

The conductor turned.

"The report didn't say, sir. It only gave a few details of description. The man's about six feet tall, well built, and weighs about a hundred and eighty pounds." The conductor fixed a calm look upon Dillon. "I'd say he was about your build, sir."

Dillon lit his cigarette. He returned the conductor's look.

"Funny, isn't it, how people seem to have things in common. Now I'd say you looked a lot like me yourself."

They held each other's eyes for a moment. Finally Dillon spoke in a soft voice. "Is that all you wanted?"

The conductor's face showed nothing. "'Yes, sir. That's all."

He went out.

Dillon looked thoughtfully at the steel door of the compartment that closed behind the conductor. A conductor with the eyes of a man above normal intelligence and a much too servile manner — and unshaven whiskers. Very odd. He scratched his chin, meditating.

He looked at his watch. It was time for the dining car to open. The best way to carry off this game was to act natural and go through the motions of a regular passenger. He'd have dinner.

Besides, there was no danger yet. The next stop would be Albuquerque —two hours away. Lorch would not try to get off before then. Dillon expected him to make a break either at the station or as the train was slowing down for the halt at the desert stop.

The dining car was to the rear directly adjoining his car. A baggage car was directly in front toward the engine. Dillon had noted this when he had boarded the train.

The dining car was occupied by only two other passengers. One of

(*Continued on page* 102)

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Name.....

Position..... *Age*.....

Address.....

(*Continued from page* 101)
them was getting up to leave as Dillon entered. As he passed Dillon in the passageway, the detective took rapid stock of him.

But the man was hard to classify. The only outstanding thing about him, Dillon decided, was his eyebrows. They were thin and grew in a neat line that made them look almost feminine. The man was about six feet tall, but walked with a stoop, looking straight ahead and casting his eyes neither to right or left.

Dillon had a faint impression of one other thing about him as they passed. There was a white fleck on his coat collar, a fleck of some sort of liquid substance. Before Dillon could identify it the man had disappeared.

THE detective noticed that he went toward the front of the train. That meant that he must be an occupant of Dillon's car. He made a mental note to check that fleck later on. But he had already discarded the man as a possible suspect for Lorch. The scanty-eyebrowed diner had been clean shaven.

Dillon took a seat and ordered dinner. But he was hardly in the second course of the meal before he was struck with the impression that somebody was watching him. He lifted his head. The second occupant of the car was a girl. She quickly lowered her eyes as the plainclothes man looked at her, but Dillon had already caught her.

He studied her as she became very much absorbed in her food. She was a decidedly attractive young woman, Dillon thought, a girl whose evident taste and breeding reflected plainly in her smart clothes and in the deft grace with which her hands moved. She was becoming clearly nervous under Dillon's scrutiny so the detective, in deference, shifted his eyes.

At that moment another diner entered the car. Dillon seemed to have his interest centered on his food, but he took a comprehensive survey of this diner.

The newcomer was almost comic in his get-up. From wide-brimmed hat to short half-boots, from cigar to heavy gold watch chain, he was typical of blue-grass Southern gentry. He was the Kentucky Colonel personified.

Comic or not, there was one thing that made Dillon's nostrils tighten like a dog on the scent of prey. The man had a very close clipped mustache and goatee. And though they were grey, Dillon could have sworn that the man was younger than he appeared. There was something in his erect stature that smacked of youth. But then it might be the pride that Southerners put so much store by that gave the man his erect carriage.

The detective's eyes went back to the girl. She had gathered up her things with that deftness which marked her so plainly in the social scale and was about to leave the dining car.

Dillon watched her, enjoying her graceful movement down the aisle and out through the passageway. She was going the same way as the thin-eyebrowed fellow. Another occupant of his car. Dillon didn't like that so much. If there was going to be trouble back there and he and Lorch had to shoot it out, she might get in the way.

Dillon gazed after her, a slight frown of puzzlement on his forehead. There had been something wrong about her. Some little flaw in her ensemble that he had noticed when he scanned her. That he had seen but had not registered yet within his brain.

Then he remembered. It had been her stocking just at the juncture of sleek silk and black, shiny, new patent leather. That little jagged hole he had seen, just at the shoe line. It annoyed Dillon with a plaguing persistence.

Where could a girl get a jagged little tear like that? Dillon searched his mind. A sharp-pointed instrument could do that—something like a nailfile. Dillon started. Was there a connection maybe? If the girl had been excited or interested in some-

thing else at the time of the tear she might never have noticed it. It also meant that the girl must have been fairly preoccupied directly afterward. A girl of her smartly attired type usually inspects her stockings frequently. Whatever this girl had been doing after the tear it had so involved her attention that it had prevented her from that little duty.

Dillon put down a forkful of fried potatoes, dropped a bill on the table and got up. When the girl reached the door of the dining car he was only a couple of steps behind her.

His hand went out, reached the knob before hers, turned and opened the door. She looked curiously up at him for a moment, but his face was impassive as an owl's.

(*Continued on page* 104)

HEADLINERS

IN THE NEXT ISSUE

•

THE BLACK SEAL OF DEATH

A Novelet of Crime's Legion

By

G. T. FLEMING-ROBERTS

•

RING OF THE DEVIL

A Narcotic Agent Novelet

By

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•

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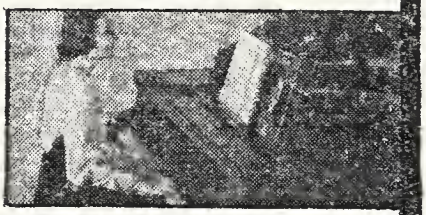

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Instrument ..... Have you Instrument? .....

Name .....

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(*Continued from page* 103)

She bent her head, confused by his silence and passed out the door.

At the door to the Pullman just across the vestibule platform the same little drama took place. This time Dillon was just a trifle more gallant in his actions. Encouraged, she essayed a little half-smile but Dillon kept his sphinx-like countenance. A rosy color stained the girl's cheek, and she hurried through the door with her head held high.

A lurch of the car threw Dillon into the corner of the vestibule and he lost a few paces. When he finally turned into the compartment passage he found her halted at the other end of it. There apparently was a leak in the water cooler, and a thin stream of water spraying across the passageway fashioned an effective barrier.

Dillon came up behind her, took in the situation at a glance but said nothing. She looked up at him with distressed eyes, but quickly averted them when he stared through her. Dillon let the tension grow for a moment, then reached out a finger and plugged the leak in much the same manner as the legendary hero of Holland plugged his dyke.

She gazed wordlessly at his finger and then gave him a quick appraising glance. He still was adamant. She looked away. But she kept looking at the finger. Finally it broke her reserve. She smiled, and the smile became a tinkle of laughter.

"You are a helpful person to have around," she said.

"That's what I try to be," he said gravely.

She shot a hasty glance at him.

"Don't you ever laugh?" she murmured.

"Not when there isn't anything funny."

She colored and said stiffly:

"I'm sorry I'm not able to return the favor."

"But you can," said Dillon immovably.

Her face grew blank. "I don't understand."

Dillon said slowly, "I'd like to know where you got that little hole in your stocking at the back of the ankle."

Her eyes widened. "I'm afraid you are being impertinent," she gasped.

"No," said Dillon very deliberately, "I'm not. I'm a detective, and I'm interested in what you were doing in my compartment about an hour ago!"

It was a long shot, but it found its mark. The girl's lips were trembling and her breath was coming in little gasps. She was making visible efforts to control herself.

"I don't know what you're talking about," she said breathlessly.

DILLON knew it was all his way now.

"I'll be in my compartment until we reach Albuquerque," he said in a flat voice. "I think you'd better explain about that hole before we get there. I don't want to arrest you on a charge of murder unless you force me to!"

He turned and walked into his compartment. The door slammed behind him.

He looked at his watch. An hour to Albuquerque. He picked up a magazine, lighted a cigarette and sat down to wait for the girl.

Half an hour later, a thought occurred to him. He had forgotten to lock the door of the compartment when he had gone into the dining car! What if—? He moved quickly over to the washroom and tore at the door handle. The next moment he was cursing fluently. The body was gone!

And where the devil was the girl? He had been sure of her. He tightened his lips and, opening the door of his compartment, strode angrily up the aisle of the car.

The car was completely changed. The Pullman berths had been made up and the aisle was a narrow path between the green-curtained walls. Dillon did not notice the strange absence of people or sound. He did not notice the mad pace of the train, which had accelerated as it thundered on through the night.

(*Continued on page* 106)

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(*Continued from page* 104)

He stopped outside the girl's berth. He reached down and scratched the woodwork of the seat. He waited ten seconds and scratched again. Suddenly, with one of these rare premonitions, he leaped back. Before his eyes an arm and hand flashed down from the upper berth into the space where he had been a moment before. In the fingers of that hand was grasped a long skewerlike instrument resembling a hatpin!

The arm withdrew in a split second, the green curtains rustled and were still. Dillon's hand darted to his shoulder holster. He sent a shot crashing into those curtains. The time for subterfuge was past.

But the curtains mocked him. They remained motionless, telling nothing. Dillon crouched and with his finger on the trigger snatched at the curtains. Tore them aside.

The face of the dead man that had been in his compartment an hour ago smirked back down at him! In the corpse's forehead was a round hole that had not been there before. Dillon's bullet had found a mark, but not in living flesh.

Dillon flung the curtains wider. It wasn't possible that a dead man had tried to stab him. But the upper berth was completely empty save for that taunting corpse!

The detective heard a slight noise at the other end of the car and whirled, his finger tightening nervously on the trigger. A figure, crouching low, whisked out of sight into the compartment passage. The detective pressed closer to the green curtains. He made too good a target out there in the center of the aisle.

As he did so his angle of vision into the upper berth shifted, and suddenly the explanation of the mystery of the upper berth was explained. The wooden partition between sections and separating the upper berths had been removed. A man could crawl and wriggle along behind these curtains for the entire length of the car! That explained the man dropping into the aisle at the other end. It must have been Lorch. And he still hadn't had a good look at the man. This Lorch was certainly turning out to be nobody's fool!

Without stopping to solve the puzzle of what porter was responsible for the way those Pullman sections had been made up, Dillon sidled up the aisle toward the compartment passageway where Lorch had disappeared. This cat and mouse game had gone far enough. The detective determined to bring it out into the open.

It took the plainclothes man almost two minutes to edge his way up to the passageway entrance. He kept close to the green curtains to avoid the line of fire that might break out at any moment from around the corner, tediously advancing foot by foot. Finally he reached the entrance.

CAUTIOUSLY he poked an eye around the corner. His tiresome traverse of the passageway had been valueless. The passageway was empty and Lorch had disappeared again!

Then suddenly the peculiar fact struck him that there was nobody in the car but himself. His shot should have aroused the car, but the place was as silent as death.

There was something strange about this. Too strange. The detective turned and went at a trot back toward the dining car. He'd find out what happened to those passengers and especially that girl. It was unbelievable for a train to become deserted in the middle of a trip between two cities.

He turned into the compartment passageway off which his own compartment opened and hurried down it to the car door at the other end. He reached it and grasped the knob.

Then he realized the devilish ingenuity that was being exercised against him. The door was locked! Lorch had barricaded the two front cars and the engine from the rest of the train! He had made certain that nobody would delay his departure from the train at Albuquerque.

And it was unlikely anyone in the other cars would gain access to this part of the train. Passengers would try the knob, think it strange that the door was locked and return to their own cars. Dillon discarded any hope there. The conductor? Lorch was the conductor. The other passengers who had been in the car? The thin-eyebrowed man, the Southern colonel, the girl—who knew? Maybe skewered by that hatpin already. Maybe face to face with that particular death at this moment.

The thought made the detective tighten his grip on his gun. If that girl was still alive she could solve the murder in the compartment, maybe identify Lorch as the killer.

Dillon moved forward in a foot by foot search of the two cars. He'd find Lorch, and find the girl, too—living or dead, or wind up with a pin through his own heart.

Warily he kicked open compartment doors and edged within them to cover their entire area with his gun. Gingerly he drew aside the green curtain and peered into berths. All drew a blank. He reached the other end of the car with no success except for the ever-present corpse.

Slowly he eased open the door into the vestibule. Lorch might be lurking out there with his pointed wire of death. But the vestibule was as devoid of living human beings as the car he had just combed.

So the answer had to be in the baggage car. Dillon filled his lungs and tried the knob. It turned. The door was open. The detective

(*Continued on page* 108)

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(*Continued from page* 107)
looked into a vault of inky blackness. He moved his body swiftly behind the door jamb. He'd be a pretty silhouette, framed in that lighted doorway.

He pulled out his small pocket flash that was standard equipment on the Homicide Squad. He lay down on the floor and, raising his arm vertically above his head, focused the flash into the car. If a shot was taken at the flash his body would be comparatively safe. He snapped the flash on.

The beam pierced the velvety blackness, almost immediately picking up a human figure. It was the girl, tied to a crate, a gag in her mouth. Dillon deflected the beam from her and sent it darting around the rest of the baggage car in swift, searching flashes. But there was no sign of that other figure he expected to be lurking there. Silence answered him. No shot came. There didn't seem to be anybody else in the car. Dillon spent two minutes in thorough search, finally satisfying himself that this was so.

He found the light switch and snapped it on. Then he crossed to the girl. He snatched the gag off.

"Who did this?" he demanded. "Who are you? What do you know about the dead man that was in my compartment!"

The girl looked up at him with frightened eyes. But she replied gamely. "How do I know who you are? Or what your game is?"

Dillon impatiently pulled out his Chicago police card and shoved it in front of her widening eyes.

"Now talk and talk fast! We've got no time to waste! When you're through, I'll get you out of this!"

Words poured from the girl's mouth. Words that gradually straightened out in Dillon's mind and formed answers to questions.

"I'm Doris Quillan—Dr. Quillan's wife. I've been following the man who killed my husband for six months. I've finally learned who he is though I've lost his trail and found it a dozen times. I traced him to this train. I boarded the train early, hoping to locate him and arrange for his arrest before he could slip away again as he had done so many other times. He effects all his escapes by means of his disguises. He's a wizard at make-up."

"I've been told as much!" Dillon snapped. "But what about the body in my compartment! Quick! What's the story on that?"

THE girl continued, still breathless but calmer now.

"Lorch killed him because he thought he suspected. I saw Lorch carry his body into your compartment in a desperate attempt to conceal it before some one who was coming down the passage the other way should discover him. I hid and watched my opportunity. And when Lorch came out I stole into the room, hoping to get direct and damaging evidence on him. Just as you figured, I tore my stocking on the nailfile in the dead man's hand and was about to take it as evidence. But I couldn't loosen the man's grip. Oh, it was horrible!" The girl shuddered in vivid remembrance.

"Yes, yes," prodded Dillon. "Go on."

"I thought somebody was coming. Maybe the murderer. I got terrified and fled."

Dillon was working on her bonds now. "And the guy who tied you up here?" he demanded.

"I couldn't understand that at all. When I left my berth to go to your compartment, someone came up behind me, put a hand over my mouth and picked me up. He carried me in here. I didn't get a good look at him until he was tying me to this crate. I couldn't believe my eyes. It was a man I thought perfectly harmless. That Colonel-somebody-or-other from the South. He must be a man working with the murderer. Maybe a confederate."

"No, not a confederate!" said Dillon grimly. "Just Lorch in one of his disguises. He just didn't want you to discover his identity, not knowing that you had already. Now let's have the important fact! Who is Lorch?"

The girl opened her mouth, but a voice cut in on her from the other end of the car and Dillon saw her eyes suddenly flick wide in terror.

"The conductor, of course," said the man whom Dillon had noted in the dining car, the man with the stoop and the thin eyebrows. He had just entered the baggage car and was calmly leaning back against it to close it. "I thought you knew that, Dillon. Lorch killed the real conductor. That was the man he hid in your compartment. Perhaps I'd better introduce myself. I'm McManus, the railroad detective. I got the tip-off that Lorch was on this train and tailed him here. But I wasn't sure of him until just fifteen minutes ago when I hid in this room and watched him make a quick change from the conductor outfit to the Southern colonel rig. I guess I should have announced myself to you before, but I was afraid Lorch might get wise and I thought it better for us to work alone."

Dillon straightened slowly from his untying of the girl. There were still a few knots to go before she would be free, but Dillon seemed more interested in the man called McManus.

He transferred his gun from right hand to left and then back again as if playing with it while he kept his eyes fixed on the newcomer's face. He said softly, very softly.

"And how did you get here, Mr. McManus? I thought there were a couple of locked doors back there that would make it hard for a person to get to this particular car."

McManus walked forward, grinning easily, one hand deep in his pocket.

"Any railroad man could tell you that, Dillon. When you can't go through trains, you go over them. I came the overhead way."

Dillon nodded.

"That does kind of explain it, doesn't it?" He still played with the gun transferring it back and forth, back and forth, from right hand to left and back to right again.

(*Continued on page* 110)

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(*Continued from page* 109)

McManus was closer, almost next to him now.

"I think we oughta work on this Lorch together," he said, grinning again. "He's somewhere in these two cars, on top, or underneath. What do you say?"

Dillon was remembering something. He trained his eyes on the man's coat collar, searching for that fleck that had been there in the dining car. But it was gone. No, there was just the slightest ring of white there now to confirm the fact that the fleck had existed. The outside of it still lingered in a traced circle but the center had melted. And the detective nodded almost imperceptibly. He thought he knew now what that fleck had been.

He nodded briskly at the man called McManus, who still kept that right hand deep in his pocket.

"All right," he said, "let's go!"

Dillon started to lead the way to the door, but a sound from the corner of the baggage car made him jump suddenly back. A groan had issued from behind some crates!

"Don't let him trick you, Dillon!" a voice gasped agonizingly, "He's no detective! I'm McManus! He got to me a little while ago and left me for dead here in the corner! He's Lorch!"

But Dillon had already recognized the conductor's voice. He had already guessed the identity of the thin-eyebrowed man. The conductor's voice merely provided the break he was waiting for. And before the man had finished speaking, in Lorch's momentary confusion, he acted a fractional second sooner than the murderer.

"Damn you! Shut your trap!" shouted Lorch wildly.

Dillon's fist wiped the words from his lips and sent him reeling back to the side of the baggage car!

But in the wrong direction. Lorch stumbled back against the light switch. His clutching hand landed on it, realized what it was and pressed frantically down. The car

BEST FUN FICTION AND FOTOS *In*

plunged into blackness and Dillon found himself in the same predicament he had been in in his own compartment. The girl's scream rang out wildly!

The detective snatched his flask from his pocket, flicked it on. At once he cut the flash and dodged madly to the right. But before he could move he felt his gun torn away. His beam, while picturing Lorch two feet away from him, coming like a maniac, his eyes wild, his mouth slavering wildly and high in the air, the deadly pin grasped in upraised fingers, had also showed the murderer his own gun. Lorch had kicked wildly at it and his foot had found the mark. Dillon was now facing that pin armed with nothing but a flashlight!

The next instant he felt the same stabbing pain in his arm that he had felt in the compartment. Lorch had got him again with that damned skewer. Dillon wondered how soon it would get him in a vital spot as he scrambled back, nursing his useless arm. And how soon would Lorch revert to his gun and abandon the pin? Lorch would probably only do that in emergency. Ballistics experts were too good at tracing bullets these days. The pin was safer.

Dillon could hear the murderer panting as he had done in the compartment. His only chance was to find that gun. He bent down on hands and knees in the blackness, sending his fingers frantically over the splintery floor.

As if by a miracle his fingers clutched metal. And in the next minute a hand was laid over his own. Lorch had been searching for the gun, too, in order to be sure his adversary should be unarmed, and had found it just too late. Dillon grabbed at the hand and pulled.

Lorch's body was pulled up against him now, both men struggling to their feet. Dillon threw one arm around the murderer and jerked the other up to crash the gun down on Lorch's skull. He wanted

(*Continued on page* 112)

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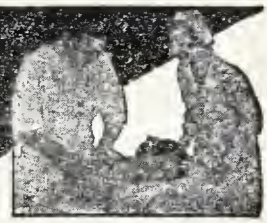

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(*Continued from page* 111)

to get the man alive. Then he stiffened painfully as again that pin found its mark, this time in his back under his right arm, but still too far away from any vital organ for serious harm.

Dillon tightened his jaws grimly. It was a race against that pin murderously stabbing up and down now, perforating his back, once, twice, ripping cloth and flesh but still miraculously escaping the vital organs. Dillon tightened his lips across his teeth with the piercing pains and, concentrating all his strength in one mighty effort, flashed his arm down! It struck bone and Lorch stumbled back!

Then Dillon's foot slipped on the worn floor. Dazed, racked with pain he fumbled with the flash to locate Lorch and see the effect of his blow. He snapped it on.

LORCH had not been hit hard enough. He towered over Dillon, his arm already starting a swift descent toward the helpless detective. The long pin glinted in the flash's beam, glinted with a message of certain death this time as it sparkled downward.

The detective made one last effort, pulled the trigger of his gun and threw himself desperately to one side to escape the blow. His body stiffened in anticipation of the next needle thrust!

Instead he heard the thump of flesh against wood. He lifted his head painfully. Lorch had fallen to his knees a scant two feet away. In his eyes was the glazed look of a man mortally wounded. Dillon's desperate bullet had sped true!

The detective lay back, gasping for breath. Slowly he recovered and finally was assured that Lorch's hatpin stabs had not done serious damage. He got up and crossed to the girl. As he finished untying her, she fell into his arms in a faint.

He placed her gently on the floor and went behind the clump of boxes, his eyes reluctant to see that story.

BEST FUN, FICTION AND FOTOS *In*

He had seen enough blood and death. But the detective had staggered to his feet and was leaning weakly against the wall, his breath coming and going irregularly. He was not seriously injured.

"I wasn't sure—what—you were doing—out there," he panted. "I could hear—but couldn't see anything at all. I was afraid to yell at first."

"You did just right, partner," said Matt Dillon gently. "Just right. I knew it was Lorch the minute he came into the car. When he made up for that Kentucky colonel effect, he forgot one thing—those strangely thin eyebrows of his. I spotted them immediately and had already figured them as belonging to a man who had them plucked to change his appearance. Besides, when I saw that fleck of soap lather on his coat collar, I knew he had shaved immediately after our scrap in the compartment. And besides—"

But the Chicago detective broke off to put out an arm to steady the other man who was slumping suddenly from weakness beside the brave little widow of the murdered eye specialist.

The train was rolling slowly into Albuquerque, right on time. And Matt Dillon grinned in spite of his pains.

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29x4.40-21	$2.15	$1.05	30x3½	$2.35	$0.95	33x4½	$3.45	$1.45
29x4.50-20	2.35	1.05	31x4	2.95	1.25	34x4½	3.45	1.45
30x4.50-21	2.40	1.15	32x4	2.95	1.25	30x5	3.65	1.65
28x4.75-19	2.45	1.25	33x4	2.95	1.25	33x5	3.75	1.75
29x4.75-20	2.50	1.25	34x4	3.25	1.35	35x5	3.95	1.75
29x6.00-19	2.85	1.25	32x4½	3.35	1.45			
30x5.00-20	2.85	1.25						
5.25-17	2.90	1.35						
28x5.25-18	2.90	1.35						
29x5.25-19	2.95	1.35						
30x5.25-20	2.95	1.35						
31x5.25-21	3.25	1.35						
6.50-17	3.35	1.40						
28x5.50-18	3.35	1.40						
29x5.50-19	3.35	1.45						
6.00-17	3.40	1.45						
30x6.00-18	3.40	1.45						
31x6.00-19	3.40	1.45						
32x6.00-20	3.45	1.55						
32x6.00-21	3.65	1.55						
32x6.50-20	3.75	1.75						
6.00-16	3.75	1.45						

HEAVY DUTY TRUCK TIRES (High Pressure)

Size	Tires	Tubes	Size	Tires	Tubes
30x5	$4.25	$1.95	34x7	$10.95	$4.65
33x5	3.99	1.75	38x7	10.95	4.65
34x5	4.25	2.25	36x8	11.45	4.95
32x6	7.95	2.95	40x8	13.25	4.95
36x6	9.95	4.45			

TRUCK BALLOON TIRES

Size	Tires	Tubes	Size	Tires	Tubes
6.00-20	$3.75	$1.65	7.50-20	$6.95	$3.75
6.50-20	4.45	1.95	8.25-20	8.95	4.95
7.00-20	5.95	2.95	9.00-20	10.95	5.65
			9.75-20	13.95	6.45

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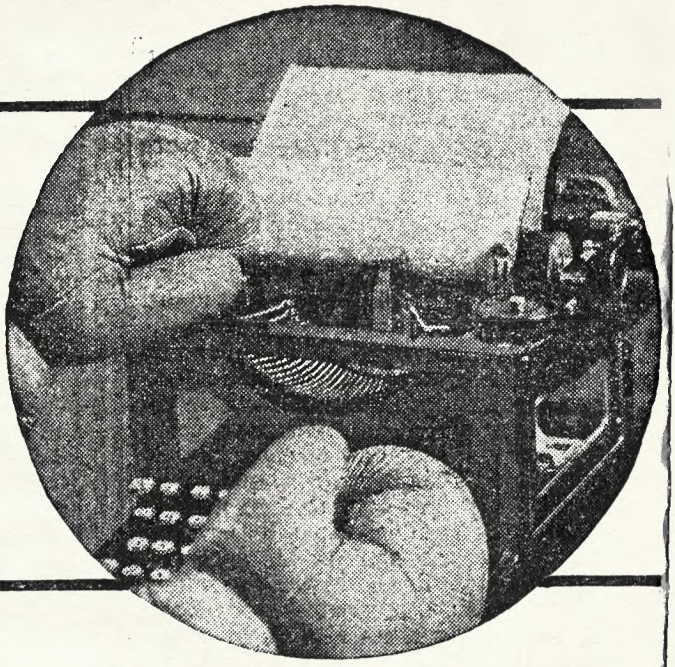

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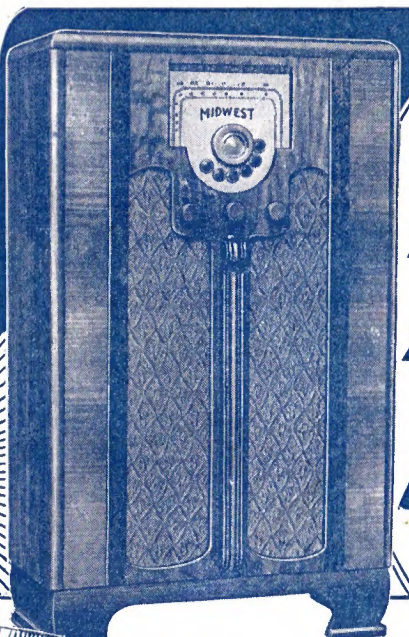

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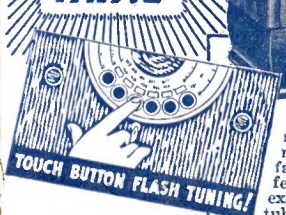

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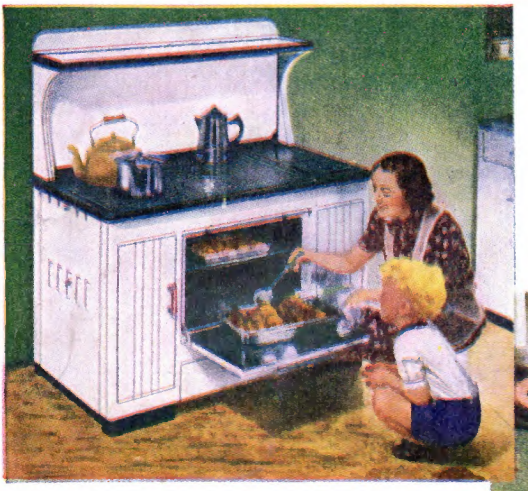

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